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Our Mission

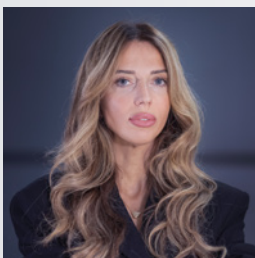
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At the **Research Institute Gnomon Wise**, we believe that disseminating knowledge and analysis conducted with integrity and impartiality can advance national interests and strengthen democratic institutions. Our think tank fosters a culture of intellectual exchange, nurturing a communal space where each person can contribute meaningfully to the broader geopolitical discourse.

In alignment with our ethos, our journal is firmly committed to promoting the idea of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and democratization. *GEOPolitics* will echo the Georgian people's strategic orientation toward the Western world, democracy, and Europeanization. Our vision is that Georgia can and must contribute to disseminating universal democratic values and contribute to regional and international security. We aim to support these goals through our analytical and intellectual contributions.

We have assembled a team of experts and contributors with deep knowledge and policy experience who will enrich the conversation about Georgia's foreign and security policy, unveiling and scrutinizing Georgia's relations with the EU, NATO, Russia, and other important geopolitical actors and international institutions. We will also investigate the ramifications of internal developments for Georgia's geopolitical role and foreign relations. By doing so, we will facilitate informed and substantial dialogue from, about and in Georgia.



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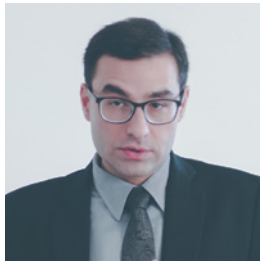
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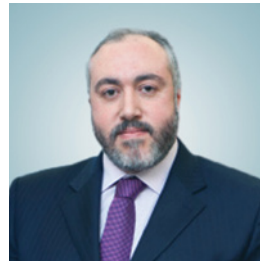
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The Great Tug of 2024:

Elections about Georgia's European Future

Georgia's civilizational path has always leaned toward Europe. Its orientation, solidified by the adoption of Christianity in the 4th century, remained intact despite centuries of invasions by powerful empires such as the Mongols, Arabs, Persians, and Ottomans. These empires attempted to divert Georgia's European aspirations through religious and cultural impositions, but Georgia held firm. Even the 1783 alliance with Orthodox Russia, seemingly based on shared faith, soon became another form of subjugation.

Under Russian control, Georgia lost its statehood, and its cultural independence was eroded. Through the Soviet period, the dominance shifted from monarchy to Marxism, but Georgia's natural gravitation toward the West persisted. Since regaining independence in 1991, the desire for European integration has been solid and constant, anchoring Georgia's foreign policy.

For the generations of Georgians born after the Soviet collapse, the dream of European integration has been more than an aspiration—it has been a lived reality. NATO offered security, while the EU promised prosperity, presenting a path to safeguard Georgia's sovereignty. These institutions embodied an opportunity for Georgia to thrive, connecting its rich history and vibrant culture with a future of peace and self-determination. Since 1991, every government has worked toward integration, seeing democratic reforms as essential for survival. The visa-free regime with the EU allowed Georgians to access new opportunities, travel, and experience life as Europeans. Despite challenges, Georgians lived optimistical-

ly, believing in the broader vision of integration into a "Europe Whole and Free."

Now, Georgia stands at a dangerous crossroads. The Georgian Dream government has shifted course, questioning the country's European future and aligning more with autocratic regimes. It has borrowed from Russian disinformation tactics, painting the West as a "global war party" while allowing a flood of Russian money and migrants into the country. Critics of the government are branded as foreign agents, and the West is depicted as an enemy of Georgian culture. This shift breaks with decades of consensus and defies the will of the Georgian people, expressed repeatedly through elections and referenda. By turning its back on the European path, the government risks turning Georgia into a pariah state, like Belarus or Venezuela.

The stakes for Georgia have never been higher. Its people now face a stark choice: continue the centuries-old dream of European integration or succumb to isolation and authoritarianism. In the words of Benjamin Franklin, those who "give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." Georgia must now decide whether to embrace its European destiny—or forsake it in pursuit of short-term stability.

Hence, it is not surprising that this volume is about the 26 October elections, offering analysis, comparisons, and insights, as well as concrete recommendations about the pre-election situation in Georgia and the various challenges associated with the post-election period.

The volume is opened with an editorial with practical recommendations to Western leaders about the necessity of following the elections closely and being ready to step in during a possible post-election crisis. The editorial team stresses the risk of unrest if the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, loses elections but decides to maintain power by force. Historically, foreign diplomatic presence has been vital in ensuring peaceful transitions in Georgia. As the elections approach, international actors must offer Ivanishvili guarantees that he can step down without fear of personal loss or retribution. The editorial explores potential foreign mediators, suggesting figures like Emmanuel Macron could provide Ivanishvili with a safe exit strategy, thereby preventing a political crisis and ensuring Georgia's democratic path.

Tornike Gordadze describes the evolving tactics authoritarian regimes use to suppress mass protests, focusing on internal and external strategies. The article highlights how regimes, including Georgia's ruling party, have learned from others like Venezuela, Belarus, and Iran, employing a mix of state-sanctioned violence, legal repression, and propaganda to maintain control. With external support from authoritarian allies like Russia and China, these regimes increasingly disregard Western criticism, manipulating nationalist rhetoric to discredit opposition movements. The piece warns that without internal solid resistance and international pressure, authoritarian governments may continue to consolidate power, as sustained violence and intimidation can wear down protest movements over time.

Jaba Devdariani continues analyzing the authoritarian tactics, focusing on the lessons the Georgian Dream has learned from Serbia and its authoritarian-leaning leader Aleksandar Vučić. Serbia has managed to maintain its EU candidacy and progress in negotiations by leveraging strategic geopolitical advantages and economic ties

with China and Russia while suppressing opposition and media freedoms. The piece warns that if Georgia's government follows Serbia's autocratic playbook, it risks losing its European future. Unlike Serbia, Georgia lacks the geopolitical leverage to keep the EU's attention, making its authoritarian drift even more dangerous for its EU aspirations.

Shota Gvineria further explores authoritarian propaganda techniques aimed at manipulating the political landscape ahead of the 2024 elections. By combining intimidation, hate speech, and disinformation, the regime seeks to suppress voter turnout among undecided, pro-Western citizens while mobilizing its base through conspiracy theories and anti-Western rhetoric. The government emphasizes peace and traditional values, framing the opposition and civil society as enemies of the state. This strategy echoes Russian disinformation tactics, aiming to create confusion and political disengagement. The recent narrative shift, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, even blames the West for the 2008 war, undermining Georgia's national interests and territorial integrity. The article argues that pro-democracy forces, in coordination with Western partners, must counter these narratives with fact-based campaigns to expose the regime's destructive policies and prevent further isolation from Europe and the West. Adequate international pressure and electoral monitoring are vital to ensuring free and fair elections and reversing Georgia's slide into authoritarianism.

Sergi Kapanadze zooms in from a generally strained pre-election environment to the new round of attacks against Georgian NGOs. In September 2024, the Georgian Dream launched a new aggressive attack through the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) and judicial reinterpretation of the Law on Political Associations of Citizens (LPAC), targeting NGOs like Transparency International Georgia. This new legal strategy effectively classified NGOs as political entities, subjecting them

to restrictions typically applied to political parties, including financial scrutiny and severe operational constraints. The international community criticized these actions, which led to a probably temporary retreat of the ACB. However, the strategic implications of this new attack remain dire, with NGOs under constant threat of further legal and financial repression.

Vano Chkhikvadze sums up the volume with an in-depth analysis of the foreign and security policy platforms of the leading parties competing in the 2024 elections. Foreign and security policy, mainly European integration, has overtaken domestic issues like unemployment and debt as the primary political battleground. While opposition parties frame the election as a referendum between aligning with the EU or Russia, the rul-

ing Georgian Dream party emphasizes peace and stability, warning against Western interventionism and touting its record of avoiding war. Despite all significant parties supporting EU accession, the opposition views it as a tool to oust the Georgian Dream, while the government portrays itself as resisting EU pressures. NATO membership, meanwhile, has largely faded from the political discourse. Ultimately, the election is seen as a pivotal choice for Georgia's foreign policy direction, between furthering Western integration or moving toward isolation with closer ties to Russia ■

With Respect,
Editorial Team

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VANO CHKHIKVADZE

Editorial

The Power of Presence: Ensuring a Peaceful Transfer in Georgia's 2024 Elections

The upcoming Georgian parliamentary elections are poised to be a turning point for the country's political future. As ballots are cast and results tallied, what happens afterward could be even more critical. If Bidzina Ivanishvili, the de facto leader of Georgian Dream (GD), sees his party losing power, the challenge will not be limited to counting votes—it will be about ensuring a peaceful transfer of power. History shows that high-level foreign diplomatic intervention has been crucial in similar moments in Georgia's past.

This year, however, the dynamics are different, and foreign powers must tread carefully. Their role is not to interfere in the election results but to influence Ivanishvili's calculations, ensuring he can step down without feeling his survival is at risk. Timing, tactics, and pressure will matter enormously.

The Polling Landscape

Current polls in Georgia offer an unclear picture of the likely outcome of the elections. According to Edison Research, Georgian Dream is polling at 32.4%, a significant drop from its performance in the 2020 elections, where it secured nearly 48% of the vote. Meanwhile, the United National Movement (UNM) is polling around 20%. At the

same time, three other parties aim at double digits, reflecting a growing opposition coalition that could pose a severe challenge to GD's dominance.

The overall sentiment in the country is one of dissatisfaction. According to Edison Research, 63% of the population believes Georgia is headed in the wrong direction, and only 29% believe that the Georgian Dream deserves to remain in power. This suggests that opposition parties may have a real chance to challenge GD's dominance in the upcoming elections.

Foreign Actors and Power Transitions

Foreign powers have historically mediated political transitions in Georgia. In 2003, following the Rose Revolution, US Ambassador Richard Miles and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov played critical roles in securing Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation and his safety. Similarly, in 2012, when Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement lost to Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream, US Senators and European diplomats helped guide the process toward stability. The presence of high-level foreign figures provided security guarantees to the outgoing leaders, reducing the risks of a violent conflict or temptations to cling to power through unconstitutional instruments.



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This year, the stakes are higher. Ivanishvili's informal control over the state apparatus is deep-rooted, and there are signs that he fears losing not just political power but his wealth and personal security if his party is defeated. His political repression, including the arrests of opposition figures and attempts to demonize civil society, suggest a man fearful of potential retribution. His perception of Western sanctions and criticism heightens this fear.

For Ivanishvili, the calculation is simple: If losing the election means losing everything, he may resort to undemocratic means to stay in power, a reality that political theorists have long observed in authoritarian settings. Leaders in precarious situations are more likely to hold onto power if they believe there is no safe exit.

Affecting (mis)Calculation

Political theorists have studied the behavior of leaders facing electoral defeat in regimes with both democratic and autocratic tendencies. Prospect theory by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky posits that individuals are more likely to take risks to avoid losses than to achieve gains. Applied to Ivanishvili's situation, if he perceives that losing an election poses an existential threat to his wealth or freedom (or even life), he may take extreme actions to avoid that loss, including holding onto power through unconstitutional means.

Furthermore, elite bargaining theorists, like Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, suggested almost a century ago that peaceful transitions of power are affected by the calculation of leaders. The transition will likely happen when leaders are given credible guarantees that their core interests—personal safety, wealth, and status—will be protected after they leave office. Without such guarantees, leaders like Ivanishvili may calculate that staying in power, even through force, is preferable to losing.

Several scenarios can be imagined in the immediate aftermath of the elections. In the first scenario, the Georgian Dream will win by a slight majority, which could raise questions about how legitimate the outcome was, considering the unfair pre-election environment, attack on the NGOs, hampering of the work of the monitoring organizations, and widespread vote-buying. In 2020, the crisis of legitimacy emerged when the opposition parties decided to boycott the Parliament after the election results were considered unfair. At that time, the US and EU ambassadors took the lead in mediating the political crisis, which culminated in the high-level involvement of European Council President Charles Michel. The Michel Agreement led to the opposition entering the Parliament, but the more significant longer-term provisions were not implemented since GD withdrew from the agreement in 2021.

If such a scenario repeats itself, the GD leader might miscalculate that arresting opposition parties or banning them, as they promised before the elections, could be a way out. This miscalculation can only be prevented by another diplomatic effort from the West.

In another scenario, the GD loses power as the opposition parties receive more support and the right to form a coalition government. In such a scenario, the GD leader could miscalculate that because he is poised to lose everything, a Belarus or Russia-type dictatorship could be a better alternative to ensure his safety. A diplomatic effort can also prevent this miscalculation from the West.

Who Can Influence Ivanishvili?

Not all international actors are in a position to influence Ivanishvili. In recent years, local ambassadors in Georgia have been targeted by the Georgian Dream and labeled as foreign actors attempting to interfere in domestic politics. For

example, the Estonian and Lithuanian Foreign ministers have been vocal critics of Georgia's democratic backsliding, but this has only led the ruling party to paint Eastern European diplomats as adversaries. Similarly, US officials, including the Senators who played some role in past transitions, face credibility challenges due to upcoming elections in the US, and their future involvement in Georgia is uncertain.

Even the European Union is in a precarious position. The European Council President Charles Michel, who mediated the 2021 political agreement between the opposition and GD, is set to step down, with António Costa slated to replace him. However, Costa's lack of experience mediating political crises means he may lack the necessary influence in Georgia. Furthermore, Michel's previous agreement ultimately failed, with both GD and the opposition rejecting the terms, damaging the EU's standing as a neutral actor.

An unexpected option could be Viktor Orbán, Hungary's Prime Minister, who has been an ally to illiberal leaders across Europe. While Orbán may seem like a figure Ivanishvili could trust, he is unlikely to be seen as a legitimate mediator by the opposition or Western powers. Furthermore, Orbán's past relationship with Georgia has been complicated by his government's sheltering of Georgian political exiles after 2012, potentially creating distrust between him and Ivanishvili.

The Most Credible Ones

Given the current landscape, three potential figures could influence Ivanishvili's calculations if he loses the elections.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, has the authority and influence to offer political and economic incentives for a peaceful transition. However, her affiliation with

the European People's Party (EPP), historically supporting Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM), and her being considered an "enemy" by the GD may limit her perceived neutrality. Still, her strong personality and influence could be a tipping factor.

The British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, could be another foreign dignitary who could intervene. The UK is a credible actor and not embroiled in EU politics or Georgian politics. However, the British government has not been significantly involved in Georgia's recent political developments, which could limit its influence. In any case, the UK's role should not be underestimated.

Emmanuel Macron, President of France, stands out as the most credible figure. Ivanishvili holds French citizenship, and France has historically played a key role in mediating conflicts in Georgia, including during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, when then-President Nicolas Sarkozy brokered a ceasefire. Macron's relationship with Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili, who also has French roots and citizenship, further strengthens his position as a potential mediator.

The Power of (Timely) Diplomatic Presence

As Georgia heads toward potentially its most pivotal election since 2012, the stakes for democracy are high. A high-level foreign presence, particularly figures like Macron, could distinguish between a peaceful transition and a political crisis. This involvement, however, needs to be timely and swift. A week late or a week early could reinforce miscalculations. If the Georgian Dream loses, the foreign actors must offer Ivanishvili the guarantees he needs to step down peacefully. By influencing his calculations, they can help ensure that Georgia remains on the path to democracy rather than slipping into authoritarianism ■

Lessons from the Evolving Tactics of Protest Control in Authoritarian Regimes

What do the recently killed Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and Georgia's informal leader, the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, have in common? Both consider the Georgian Rose Revolution and all so-called color revolutions as fomented from the outside and implemented locally by "agents" of the West. On 8 March 2005, at a monster demonstration organized by Hezbollah and other pro-Syrian groups in Beirut to counter what was then called the "Cedar Revolution" triggered by the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Nasrallah fulminated: "Lebanon is not Ukraine. Lebanon is not Georgia. Lebanon is Lebanon (...) If some think that they can bring this country down, with its regime, its stability, its security, and its strategic choices, with their connections, their positions, and sponsors, with some demonstrations, some scarves, some slogans, and

some media, then they are wrong... I address the following to America, President Bush, and Ms. Condoleezza Rice..."

In a decade or two, authoritarian regimes have learned a great deal and appear to be better equipped to manage social unrest.

In Lebanon in 2005 and Georgia in 2003, widespread and primarily peaceful revolutions achieved victories: the Syrian regime withdrew its troops from Lebanese territory, and the corrupt post-Soviet Shevardnadze regime fell. It was also a decade marked by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the fall of the dictatorial regimes of Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, and Gaddafi in Libya. The hope appeared that many other cruel and repressive regimes would follow.



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Thornike Gordadze, a Franco - Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro - Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010 - 12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at SciencesPo in Paris and is an Eastern Neighbourhood and Black Sea program fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute. Gordadze, also a Researcher at Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Paris SciencesPo (2005).



But ten years on, the trend has reversed: Bashar El-Assad in Syria, the Mullahs in Iran, Maduro in Venezuela, the military regime in Algeria, Lukashenko in Belarus, and Ortega in Nicaragua, long after mass upheavals and mobilizations remain in power. Worse still, the “restorations” of authoritarian power in Egypt and Tunisia and the maintenance of the ethno-confessional predatory political system in Lebanon have left optimists disillusioned. It seems that in a decade or two, authoritarian regimes have learned a great deal and appear to be better equipped to manage social unrest. In the last ten years, only two examples of successful popular revolutions have come to mind: Armenia in 2018 and Bangladesh in 2024.

The resistance of authoritarian regimes to street protests and the consolidation of authoritarian regimes is interesting to observe in light of increasing authoritarianism in Georgia and crucial elections on 26 October. A few weeks before the

election, the opposition seems ahead of the Georgian Dream (GD). Still, there are great fears about the possibility of an outright falsification of the results by the ruling regime, which can publish the result it wishes, as happened in Venezuela this August. In this case, demonstrations and street actions are to be expected. Notably, the Rose Revolution in November 2003 occurred following elections falsified by Shevardnadze’s Citizen’s Union. How will the GD react to the outcome of the 2024 elections? What has changed since 2003? Is the current government better prepared and better armed? What internal and external factors favor authoritarian regimes?

Declining Fear of the West

In the past decades, many authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes tried to control their non-democratic actions - electoral manipulation, opposition repression, media pressure - and keep

them within certain limits so as not to provoke strong Western reactions. The GD itself attached great importance to what Europe and the US had to say and went to great lengths to avoid overt repression and gross falsification. In 2020, for example, the GD took “only” 47% of the vote, whereas Lukashenko won nearly 80%. In 2024, the regime seems to be wholly emancipated and free of such considerations: the West is evil; it wants to destroy “Georgian traditions” and involve the country in the war against Russia. Western criticism is described as biased and intended to help the opposition parties, their “agents.”

Authoritarian regimes capitalize on the divisions and weaknesses of the Western bloc.

Authoritarian regimes capitalize on the divisions and weaknesses of the Western bloc. Hungary’s peculiar position within the EU makes any sanction policy difficult, not to mention the bureaucratic red tape. Divisions can also be observed within Western countries with the rise of isolationist or extremist political forces on the right or left, which often sympathize with authoritarian regimes and want to limit support for democracy. There is also an inevitable Western fatigue about fighting for values, despite declarations to this effect at the start of the Biden presidency.

Western countries are often slow to act, responding to crises rather than taking preventive measures. By the time they impose economic sanctions, regimes have usually already crossed critical thresholds.

Western countries are often slow to act, responding to crises rather than taking preventive measures. By the time they impose economic sanctions, regimes have usually already crossed critical

thresholds. These sanctions are then used by authoritarian governments in their nationalist rhetoric, portraying them as foreign interference, which fuels conspiracy theories. We’ve frequently heard Western diplomats argue that it would be premature to take decisive action against the Georgian government because Georgia is not yet like Belarus. However, considering how effective measures against Belarus were only after the dictatorship had been fully established, this approach is questionable. The European bureaucracy—speaking in a neutral sense—is, by its very nature, unable to operate differently. Authoritarian regimes are aware of this and use it to their advantage to stay ahead of the curve.

Authoritarian Solidarity

One of the reasons why authoritarians are more self-confident and assertive is that there is an apparent solidarity between them and the formation of a so-called “authoritarian international.”

One of the reasons why authoritarians are more self-confident and assertive is that there is an apparent solidarity between them and the formation of a so-called “authoritarian international.” China and Russia issued a remarkable joint [statement](#) on 4 February 2022, aimed at denouncing the US refocus on reviving democracy and supporting media independence and freedom of speech and assembly. It also proposed an alternative political model tailored to the two countries’ political systems that fit all autocratic leaders’ agendas worldwide.

The widespread use of surveillance cameras and the creation of the legal basis for widespread wiretapping in Georgia have been imitated from Chinese and Russian practices.

Weaker authoritarian regimes receive assistance from other, more entrenched, and consolidated authoritarian governments, such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Authoritarian regimes share their know-how in the surveillance and repression of dissent. It is a question of both methodology and technology. The discrediting of opposition, independent media, civil society, the sharing of illiberal and anti-democratic narratives, and the means of financial, media, and even physical pressure are imitated, imported, and adapted from one country to another. Internet control technology, monitoring of communications, and wiretapping methods are readily transferred between countries. Georgia and its intelligence services are learning best practices from Russia and China. The widespread use of surveillance cameras and the creation of the legal basis for widespread wiretapping in Georgia have been imitated from Chinese and Russian practices.

When dictatorships falter under public pressure, others lend a helping hand, including using force. Iran and Russia are involved in the Syrian civil war, and China and Russia support all authoritarian regimes in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Russia's Direct Backing

Russia has been crucial in sustaining many authoritarian regimes, as it has emerged over the years as a leading revisionist and reactionary power.

Russia has been crucial in sustaining many authoritarian regimes, as it has emerged over the years as a leading revisionist and reactionary power. This role is not new—Tsarist Russia was already intervening across Europe in the 19th century to suppress democratic, liberal, and socialist movements. Today, Russia continues this legacy by supporting populist and anti-liberal governments around the

world. The Kremlin sees the West as its primary adversary and acts accordingly: in Africa, it backs so-called “anti-colonialist” regimes like those in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Zimbabwe; in Latin America, it aligns with socialist, “anti-imperialist” governments such as Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua; and in the Middle East, it props up military or military-religious autocracies, including those in Egypt, Algeria, Syria, and Iran. Whenever there is a civil war, Russia is quick to intervene, offering weapons, logistical support, or even mercenaries, such as the Wagner group, which operates in places like Libya, Syria, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.

Russia is particularly useful in repressing the opposition and its demonstrations. [According](#) to Mike Pompeo, then US Secretary of State, in 2019, when the Venezuelan opposition was about to overthrow Maduro, the latter, ready to board the plane to flee to Havana, was dissuaded by the Russians, who persuaded him to stay and fight while promising substantial aid. Today, more than a hundred Russian military advisors, along with Chinese and Cubans, are said to be working with Maduro.

Russian involvement is even more massive in Belarus. The country has de facto become Russia's dominion, especially after Lukashenko decided to falsify the August 2020 elections and faced mass protests. In the years preceding the crisis, the Belarusian regime had tried to maintain a degree of maneuverability vis-à-vis the Russians, notably by increasing its contacts with Europeans and Americans. Mass protests scared the dictator, who had no choice but to accept Russia's help in exchange for renouncing its sovereignty. According to many reports, Russian special forces have directly participated in the crackdown, and Putin promised economic and military assistance, effectively shielding Lukashenko from international sanctions. The [infusion](#) of USD 1.5 billion in loans and political backing allowed Belarus to avoid com-

plete financial collapse but turned Minsk into a Moscow puppet.

The control of Belarus played a crucial role in Putin's decision to attack Ukraine in February 2022. Lukashenko approved the invasion and offered the country's territory for that purpose, as Kyiv is only a few dozen kilometers from the Belarusian border. Since 2020, Belarus has become an international pariah and the home of Russian nuclear warheads.

Russia literally saved the regime of the Syrian dictator and war criminal Bashar al-Assad when the latter started to be contested by its people in the wave of the Arab Spring that reached Syria in 2011. The Syrian revolution began as a peaceful mass mobilization that was violently repressed by the regime. Consequently, the protest took the form of an armed rebellion dominated in the first phase by a pro-democracy Free Syrian Army. The Assad regime was about to collapse as it had lost control of 80% of the territory by 2014. Here again, Russia's support for the embattled regime was decisive: like Maduro and Lukashenko, Assad was dissuaded from giving up by Moscow. Russia encouraged the government to focus on all-out repression, including the use of chemical and biological weapons.

In 2015, Russia initiated military operations in Syria, focusing on heavy aerial bombardments and airstrikes targeting civilian populations in areas held by opposition forces. The near-total destruction of cities like Homs, Aleppo, Deraa, and Al-Ghuta, with Iranian units and Lebanese Hezbollah supporting ground operations, allowed Bashar al-Assad to regain the upper hand. As a result, Assad now controls most of Syria, with the exception of the Idlib region and areas held by Kurdish forces.

Since launching its anti-liberal, anti-Western campaign, the GD has found a reliable ally in Moscow. Russia has praised Tbilisi for its "courage" and "determination" in resisting the pressures of what

Moscow calls the "Global War Party." The GD's election narrative hinges on the argument that a war with Russia is inevitable if the opposition wins. In contrast, if the GD stays in power, they claim peace will be preserved as Russia would not intervene. Essentially, the GD is leveraging the threat of Russian aggression to its advantage, aiming to maintain power by indirectly relying on Russian military strength.

In the event of mass protests sparked by electoral fraud, Russia could step in to support the Ivashvili regime. While a full-scale invasion is unlikely, though not entirely off the table, the use of threats will likely intensify. Destabilization could take many forms, including the movement of Russian troops from the occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, advancing further into unoccupied Georgian territory, potentially cutting off the country's main highway, which lies only a few hundred meters from the closest Russian positions. Other possibilities include sabotage of critical infrastructure, the involvement of figures like Ramzan Kadyrov, or reigniting separatist sentiment in Javakheti, a region with a significant Armenian population. The GD would not oppose such actions, and the Georgian opposition, along with the army, which has so far remained politically neutral, lacks the resources to resist. Any such crisis would also have significant implications for Europe and the international community. It is in the West's interest to act preventively to avoid larger consequences.

State and Paralegal Violence

Every authoritarian government's typical first response to protests is violence. This can be carried out by state law enforcement agencies or by violent paramilitary groups operating with covert government backing.

In Belarus, Lukashenko's response saw a sharp increase in violence. More than 35,000 protesters

were [detained](#) in the months following the election. According to Amnesty International, the use of torture and physical abuse by security forces was widespread and systematic, intended to instill fear and suppress the protests. Even peaceful demonstrators were met with excessive force, as seen during large gatherings in Minsk in August and September 2020.

In Venezuela, Maduro's government has regularly deployed security forces, including the National Guard, to suppress protests, often resorting to live ammunition and tear gas. The regime accused the opposition of plotting a coup and initiated mass arrests. A special operation, known as "[Tun Tun](#)" (meaning knock-knock in English), involved the Bolivarian Intelligence Service conducting door-to-door raids, typically at night and without warrants, to detain those linked to the protests. Thousands of protesters and opposition supporters were arrested, leading Maduro to order the refurbishment of two prisons to accommodate them. The goal was to instill fear among opponents and create a climate of terror. Additionally, the government set up a phone line, an app, and a website to collect reports on "traitors," with Maduro personally urging citizens to report individuals participating in the protests.

The brutal use of force by the state is a key tactic in quelling mass protests, though the level of violence varies. In Nicaragua's 2018 protests, for example, security forces [killed](#) over 300 opposition activists, students, and civil society leaders, showing no hesitation in using live ammunition. In contrast, the violence used against the Algerian Hirak (revolution) in 2019-2021 and the Lebanese mass protests was more dispersed. Generally, the less legitimacy a regime has, the more violently it responds. Looking at the trajectory of Iranian protests, from the Green Movement in 2009 to the fuel price protests of 2019 (known as Bloody November) and the 2022-2023 Masha Amini protests, we see a clear increase in state brutality. In

2009, around 60 people were murdered during the largest demonstrations since the Islamic Revolution. In subsequent movements, hundreds of Iranians have been killed, and during the most recent "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests, even 68 minors lost their lives.

A particularly troubling aspect of suppressing mass protests is the use of pro-government militias to intimidate and terrorize dissenters. These armed groups, operating with impunity, allow governments to avoid direct international scrutiny.

A particularly troubling aspect of suppressing mass protests is the use of pro-government militias to intimidate and terrorize dissenters. These armed groups, operating with impunity, allow governments to avoid direct international scrutiny. Their actions, which often include the assassination of activists and journalists, create an alternative system of control, particularly in areas where formal state security forces may be reluctant to intervene openly.

In Venezuela, militias known as "[colectivos](#)" are recruited from the poorest neighborhoods, receiving between \$1,000 and \$1,500, and often ride motorcycles to violently attack protesters. In Iran, beyond the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, which is the state's core security apparatus, the Basijis—an informal paramilitary group made up of millions of regime loyalists—have played a key role in repressing protests, operating without uniforms. In Lebanon, Hezbollah has helped preserve the government by mobilizing its supporters to suppress opposition. Black-clad supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal movement frequently attacked protesters, destroying their tents, assaulting journalists and TV crews, and riding motorcycles to provoke unrest, even opening fire on occasion.

In Georgia, the government has already confronted multiple waves of significant protests. These include the Gavrilov Night in June 2019, the post-election crises of 2020 and 2021, the demonstrations in July 2021, the pro-European rallies in June 2022, and the mass protests against the “agents of foreign influence” law in March 2023 and again in the spring of 2024. The government’s response has grown more brutal over time, mirroring its increasing rigidity. The police now act preemptively, often targeting political leaders. One such case involved a former chairman of the opposition party, UNM, who was [severely beaten](#) by police in April 2024. Riot police, known as “robocops,” supported by criminal investigation units, frequently use water cannons, tear gas, and, on rarer occasions, rubber bullets, which have left several young protesters blinded.

The Georgian Dream has been employing Zviad “Khareba” Kharazishvili, the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ Special Tasks Department, to [target](#) political opponents with violence, especially during protests. Kharazishvili’s unit is notorious for its aggressive crackdowns, and he has publicly admitted to leading punitive actions against opposition figures. A striking example is the case of Davit Katsarava, a leader of the Anti-Occupation Movement, who was [severely beaten](#) during the 2024 protests against the “foreign agent” law. Katsarava sustained serious injuries, including a broken jaw and head trauma, following his detention by Kharazishvili’s team. As the 2024 elections draw near, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has established special task forces, with Kharazishvili’s involvement, likely aimed at suppressing anticipated opposition unrest. These forces are expected to play a key role in managing election-related protests, raising further concerns about escalating violence. It is no surprise that the US Department of Treasury recently [sanctioned](#) Kharazishvili and his deputy for serious human rights abuses.

In cases of extrajudicial violence, the authorities employ violent groups on their payroll. These groups fall into several categories. First, there are the religious and ultra-nationalist extremists, referred to as “orcs” by the protesters. Encouraged by a [speech](#) from Prime Minister Gharibashvili on July 5, 2021, these groups organized a violent pogrom against LGBT-supportive organizations and journalists, resulting in the death of a cameraman. The same groups had previously [attacked](#) an anti-homophobia demonstration in May 2013.

The second group comprises young individuals with criminal backgrounds or those connected to such circles. In return for payment, [amnesty](#), or reduced sentences, they carry out violent acts against the opposition. On the eve of the 2024 elections, an amnesty was granted to over 1,000 detainees, many of whom are likely to support the ruling party under the banner of “stability and peace” during potential post-election protests in case of electoral fraud.

In addition, the government controls various sports federations, mobilizing thousands of young athletes—primarily wrestlers, judokas, and boxers—who can be deployed against protesters. These athletes are given access to sports facilities and equipment funded by the state, which they could not otherwise afford. While they hope to succeed in their sports careers, they serve the ruling party’s interests by violently confronting demonstrators.

The connections between these violent groups and the state are well-known. Public opinion widely suspects Dimitri Samkharadze, a majority party deputy, of being tasked by the ruling party to organize [violence](#) with the support of these paid groups. Mr. Samkharadze is infamous for instigating violence within parliament and is known for issuing death threats on television and social media, often posting photos of firearms. In May 2024, sev-

eral dozen masked individuals armed with sticks stormed the headquarters of the main opposition party, UNM, [destroying](#) its offices and equipment. The police's inaction and the lack of investigation suggest the involvement of the state and the ruling party.

Another instance of the state's covert tactics to undermine protests took place during the May 2024 demonstrations. Hundreds of activists and opposition leaders [were bombarded](#) with threatening phone calls, day and night, from untraceable numbers. The callers hurled insults and issued death threats, targeting the most prominent protesters and their families. Moreover, private cars and the doors of homes were vandalized. The extensive access to personal information makes it clear that the state was involved in these intimidation efforts. Mr. Samkharadze frequently shared videos on his Facebook page, filmed by the vandals themselves, some of which were evidently sent directly to him.

The Judiciary as a Tool of Oppression

State and parastate violence alone is not enough to suppress protests. Repression needs to appear legally justified, and the punishment must be drawn out over time. This is ensured through judicial measures, such as long prison sentences, hefty fines, criminal records, and never-ending investigations, all of which are powerful tools to combat dissent.

In authoritarian regimes, the judiciary is tightly controlled by the ruling party's allies, leaving no legal protection for protesters. Opposition leaders are often arrested, placed under house arrest, or stripped of their political power, limiting the capacity for organized resistance within formal political structures. This pattern was evident in Venezuela, where leaders like Leopoldo López, Juan

Guaidó, and María Corina Machado were targeted, and in Belarus, where Lukashenko systematically neutralized opposition leaders. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, a prominent opposition figure, fled to Lithuania under threat, while others like Maria Kalesnikava, Viktor Babaryka, and Valery Tsepalo were imprisoned. By isolating key leaders, Lukashenko weakened the protest movement's organizational strength, making coordinated resistance more difficult.

In most cases, arrested protesters face vague charges like attacking state security, attempting rebellion or a coup, contempt of law enforcement, or sedition. In countries like Algeria and Lebanon, such cases have sometimes been sent to military or special courts, where trials are swift and leave little room for a fair defense.

Repression of demonstrations often results in widespread convictions, not limited to protest leaders. By the summer of 2020, Belarus had nearly 1,300 political prisoners. The Algerian Hirak protests saw 260 people sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. In Venezuela, following the rigged elections in August 2024, thousands were arrested, with 1,500 still in prison by the end of September.

In Georgia, the judiciary has become notorious for handing down disproportionate sentences to activists. To suppress protests, judges impose the maximum penalties allowed under the Administrative Code.

In Georgia, the judiciary has become notorious for handing down disproportionate sentences to activists. To suppress protests, judges impose the maximum penalties allowed under the Administrative Code. For example, during the March 2023 protests, a young man accused of throwing a Molo-

to cocktail was sentenced to nine years in prison, and in the following year, another youth received a four-year sentence for damaging a surveillance camera. The Georgian judiciary, controlled by a clan of influential judges who are now sanctioned by the U.S., acts as a loyal enforcer for the regime, and it is expected that they will continue to do so if mass protests break out in response to potential election fraud.

In addition to judicial repression of activists, the Georgian Dream has systematically neutralized political opponents through arrests and imprisonment. A prime example is the detention of former president Mikheil Saakashvili, who remains in prison under what many observers consider politically motivated charges. His imprisonment has drawn widespread international criticism, with human rights organizations calling for his release. Alongside Saakashvili, numerous former high-ranking officials from his administration have also been jailed, further weakening the political opposition.

Authoritarian governments also employ a range of other tactics, too numerous to list fully. These include propaganda and smear campaigns (Black PR) aimed at discrediting protest movements, as well as manipulating societal divisions, whether ethnic, religious, or regional. Such regimes commonly frame dissent as being orchestrated by foreign powers in order to delegitimize protesters and rally their supporters around the idea of defending the nation. In Iran, the regime frequently blames the “Great Satan” United States and its “mad dog” Israel. In Venezuela, Nicaragua, and other authoritarian states, the U.S. is also cast as the shadowy instigator. In Algeria, the former colonial power France is the ideal scapegoat. In Georgia, over recent years, the government has increasingly accused protesters and dissenters of being agents of the West, whether from civil society or pro-Western opposition parties. Ivanishvili and his allies have even invented the concept of a “Global War

Party,” an imaginary and powerful entity that they claim is responsible for the war in Ukraine and is pushing Georgia toward a second front with Russia.

Anticipating Repressions

In conclusion, authoritarian regimes have become increasingly skilled at managing and suppressing mass protests, employing a range of internal and external strategies. Over the past two decades, many of these regimes have refined their methods, blending violence with legal tools to silence opposition. They often receive external support from authoritarian allies like Russia and China, which help strengthen their grip on power by providing both material aid and ideological justification. By arresting opposition leaders, using targeted violence, and manipulating the judiciary, these regimes have weakened organized resistance and diminished opposition leadership. Moreover, these regimes have grown less concerned with Western criticism, exploiting divisions among Western nations to avoid meaningful consequences. They use nationalist propaganda to frame protests as foreign plots, discrediting the movements and rallying loyalists. The rise of informal militias, violent gangs, and paramilitary groups acting as state proxies adds further complexity, allowing these governments to deny responsibility while still unleashing violence on protesters.

Strong and coordinated international pressure can empower these movements and potentially tip the balance in their favor.

What makes this trend particularly alarming is that, over time, sustained and extreme violence often wears down protest movements, enabling regimes to outlast them. As Georgia potentially faces its own political crisis due to suspected

election manipulation by the Georgian Dream, the experiences of other nations offer a sobering lesson: without a solid and unified opposition, protest movements may struggle to challenge

authoritarian rule effectively. However, strong and coordinated international pressure can empower these movements and potentially tip the balance in their favor ■

Transfusing: Lessons from Serbia's Surprising EU-Compatibility

This journal [exposed](#) in vivid detail how Georgia's government has rapidly embraced populist conservatism, coupled with a foreign policy that is nothing short of delusional. How can a government that stifles civil society, infringes on media freedoms, resorts to violence against opponents, and structurally cheats in elections still claim to aspire to European Union membership and expect to make imminent progress on this path? The dismay of activists and commentators is entirely understandable. The European Union has made it clear that the accession process is on hold for now. However, there is one pre-accession country example where Brussels tolerates similar behavior: Serbia.

A country roughly twice the size of Georgia by population has a complicated relationship with the liberal West, an Orthodox Christian heritage, and ties to Russia. Like Georgia, Serbia has been led by one political party since 2012. That party is dominated by a single man: Aleksandar Vučić.

Serbia was granted the EU candidacy in 2012 and [opened](#) accession negotiations in early 2014. Twenty-two out of 35 chapters of the membership negotiations have been opened, and two have been provisionally closed. In 2023, the EU formal [report](#) on the accession identified shortcomings but kept highlighting progress.

In stark contrast, the OSCE ODIHR, an international election watchdog, issued a damning [report](#) about the electoral process in 2023, openly speaking of the ruling party's "overwhelming advantage." Indeed, only one election has been held in Serbia since 2012 under the regular election schedule. The ruling party schedules snap elections whenever it wants. This gives the opposition little time to organize or campaign. Vučić constantly promotes the sense of emergency to trigger early elections, one of his key political instruments to secure political continuity.

In 2024, Freedom House, an international watchdog, [reported](#) a considerable drop in all democra-



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cy and governance ratings. Serbia's democracy had been steadily declining since 2014, and in 2020, Freedom House no longer qualified it as a democracy. Now, Serbia is grouped among the "transitional or hybrid regimes," just like Georgia.

Yet, Georgia boasts a considerably [higher](#) overall democracy score of 3.06 on a scale of one to seven, where one is a perfectly functioning consolidated democracy, and seven is a bloody dictatorship. In 2024, Serbia's score was a mere 3.61. Furthermore, the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International [places](#) Serbia in 104th position out of 180 countries in 2024, while Georgia is evidently performing much better, ranking 49th.

This raises the pertinent question of whether the Georgian Dream still has a long way to go to hit rock bottom. Are the pro-government pundits right in saying that progress towards the EU could still be achieved despite state capture and the repression of independent institutions and free

voices? Let us look deeper at Vučić's experience and tactics and try to discern what keeps his antics still palatable for the EU. And for how long that patience may last.

Block by Block

Just like other populist authoritarians from Venezuela to Hungary, Vučić's tactic has been to capture the state institutions gradually. The "Vučić system" is based on three pillars: a party-based patronage network, security services, and unfettered propaganda. This edifice was constructed stage by stage.

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Having succeeded in rebranding the far-right,

Srebrenica genocide-denier Serbian Radical Party (SRS) into a frequentable and (at least on paper) pro-European Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is perhaps Aleksander Vučić's most masterful political feat.

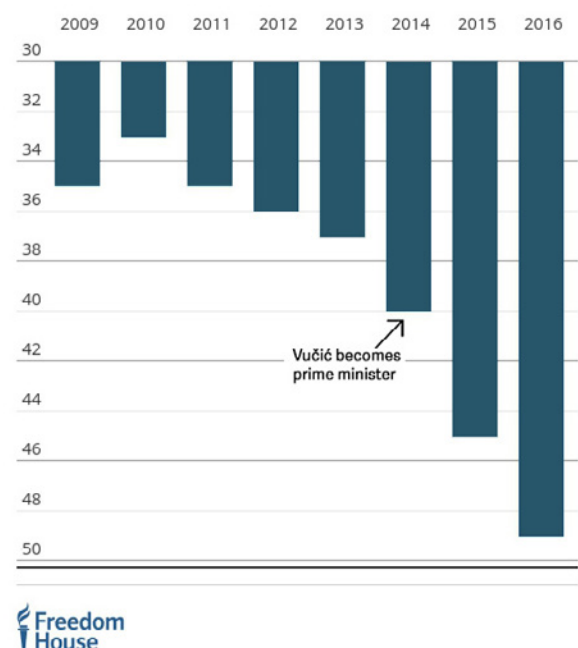
To consolidate and durably hold on to power, SNS took advantage of the pre-existing patronage networks that linked political parties to clients like state-owned enterprises and down to the hospitals, schools, and sports clubs. Before SNS's rise, these were controlled by several key political actors and were used to distribute favors (such as social aid, appointments with a good doctor, or placements in a good school), collect rents (in the form of kickbacks, through football hooligans-cum-racketeers) and influence politics (e.g., through municipal media and tabloid press).

SNS took control of these, sharing modestly with its junior partner, the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS). The network flourished: SNS claimed to have over 700,000 card-carrying members in 2018, making it the [largest party](#) in Europe. And no wonder - the SNS card gives preferential access to public services and, crucially, [employment](#). Neither is party membership a mere formality: as a minimum, newbies are expected to attend party chapter meetings, where they are indoctrinated in party views.

When capturing the institutions, Vučić [prioritized](#) security and intelligence services. Immediately after landing as First Deputy Prime Minister, he claimed the defense portfolio, became the secretary of the National Security Council, and the security services coordination supremo, the position he [kept](#) after becoming the President in 2017. Party cadre was massively promoted within the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA) and other security-intelligence agencies, and personal loyalty to Vučić remains crucial when picking the head of intelligence. SNS adversaries and allies were (and likely continue to be) targeted by massive surveillance, which only became public after a local NGO

successfully [sued](#) BIA at the European Court of Human Rights for concealing the open data. The party control perdures to this day and has been complemented by significant infiltration of Russian influences. Previous, brazenly pro-Russian head of BIA, Aleksandar Vulin, [stepped down](#) in 2023 after being sanctioned by the U.S. for helping Moscow in its "malign" activities. But he stayed on as vice Prime Minister.

Serbia's declining *Freedom of the Press* score, 2009-2016



Media subversion is one of Vučić's strong suits. After all, he served as the Minister of Information under Slobodan Milosevic's genocidal rule and already has [mastered](#) the country's media scene as well as the techniques of pressure and intimidation. Rebranded as a committed democrat, Vučić often warped market forces to shape the country's media scene to his liking. By 2012, Serbia had a panoply of media operators – including influential independent television stations, local press, and several state-controlled outlets – national and regional TV stations, newspapers, and a state news agency. However, although the media's political and opaque financial patronage has long been a concern, they took off after 2012, flooring the press freedom index (see the [graph](#) above).

The preferred method for bringing media to heel has been to starve the opposition-minded outlets of cash - by cutting public service advertising and contracts from state-owned companies - while simultaneously subsidizing loyalty. In this way, PINK TV, which previously was mostly airing entertainment content, [received](#) over EUR 7 million in public contracts in 2014-2016 and became a keystone in Vučić's propaganda machine.

The Serbian government also doggedly resisted the calls to privatize the state-owned outlets. For example, Tanjug, the state news agency whose privatization the EU was demanding, was [formally closed down](#) in 2015 but functioned as a government mouthpiece until 2021, when its copyrights were ceded to the shady company created by a folk singer whose budget [jumped](#) from EUR 500 in 2019 to EUR 7.2 million in 2021. First, bankrupting and then selling the media assets to well-connected businesses has been one of Vučić's preferred tactics.

The EU progress report for 2023 highlights the highly problematic physical and verbal intimidation of journalists by officials (183 attacks on journalists [reported](#) in 2023), [intimidatory litigation](#) by officials, politicians, and connected businesspeople, and harassment by the loyal media regulator (REM). As of today, four out of five national broadcasting licensees [are held](#) by strongly pro-governmental companies, while the regulator has delayed since 2022 the attribution of the fifth and final license.

These are, of course, just the largest blocks in Vučić's Lego castle of autocracy. Add to that neutered Parliament, subservient courts, and public administration that became synonymous with the ruling party, and you get your basic autocratic infrastructure.

But how could one speak about progress - let alone progress towards the EU - under these circumstances?

Mixed Curse, Money, Smoke and Mirrors

In a way, Serbia has had the advantage of a very low starting point. Long after Milosevic, the country was cast as Europe's main villain. European diplomats and politicians were fed up with the inefficiency, broken promises, and corruption of the so-called "democratic forces." Their bickering and incompetence facilitated the SNS's rise to power. Vučić campaigned on anti-corruption and effective government in 2012 and made good on his promises, arresting a notorious tycoon and a known drug lord by 2014. And his unquestioned nationalist credentials allowed Vučić to sideline the most odious veterans of Serbian far-right politics - Tomislav Nikolic and Vojislav Seselj. Not only was Serbia no longer seen as the Balkan spoiler-in-chief, but Vučić also signed an agreement on the normalization of relations with Kosovo in 2013 and attended the commemoration of the Srebrenica massacre in 2015. In a dramatic and welcome break from the past, these steps earned him a reputation in Europe as a pragmatic and responsible politician who could get things done. And even though the SNS was simultaneously taking steps to throttle the media and capture state institutions, its EU neighbors chose to focus on the positive.

Leveraging economic ties for political benefit and balancing the interests of the EU, China, and Russia has become a hallmark of Vučić's charm offensive.

From 2014 onwards, when Vučić gradually consolidated his power to become president in 2017, his government made a significant effort to relaunch the economy and investment. 2.2% of GDP was spent on state aid to enterprises - much of it to bolster patronage networks. But importantly, Belgrade launched gigantic infrastructure, transportation, and investment projects that the government heavily subsidized. An important part

of this support came from China and the United Arab Emirates. Still, over 12 years, it [received](#) foreign direct investment (FDI) from the EU countries totaling EUR 21.3 billion, which accounts for 58.4 percent of all FDIs in Serbia during that period. Leveraging economic ties for political benefit and balancing the interests of the EU, China, and Russia has become a hallmark of Vučić's charm offensive. This policy continues: most recently, the European Commission has developed a strategic interest in the country's lithium mines, [pressing ahead](#) with partnership despite massive public protests over the mine's anticipated ecological impact. Similarly, [purchasing](#) Rafale fighter jets from France in 2024 is Vučić's other typical invitation for the European partners to choose economic interest over principles. In the period of 2014-2020, when these projects were initiated and launched, SNS tightened control over client networks (including with EU money), marginalized the opposition, and subverted the free press.

This period saw the intensification of collaboration between the security services on one side and football hooligans and organized criminal groups on the other. Although present since the 1990s, it took a form of partnership where [reportedly](#) SNS exchanged protection for these groups pressuring its political opponents from the political party and activists – a claim for which the investigative journalists were targeted by a defamation campaign. The tabloid press – with links to intelligence services and organized crime – was often used to target activists. More broadly, civil society organizations were increasingly targeted, with the EU [Serbia Report](#) of 2019 speaking of the “environment not open to criticism” and “harsh campaigns” against human rights and civic activists. In a concomitant development, the government started [creating](#) a parallel network of government-sponsored NGOs (GONGOs), often with names similar to known groups, which occupy media space, delegitimize their critics, and shield the SNS from criticism.

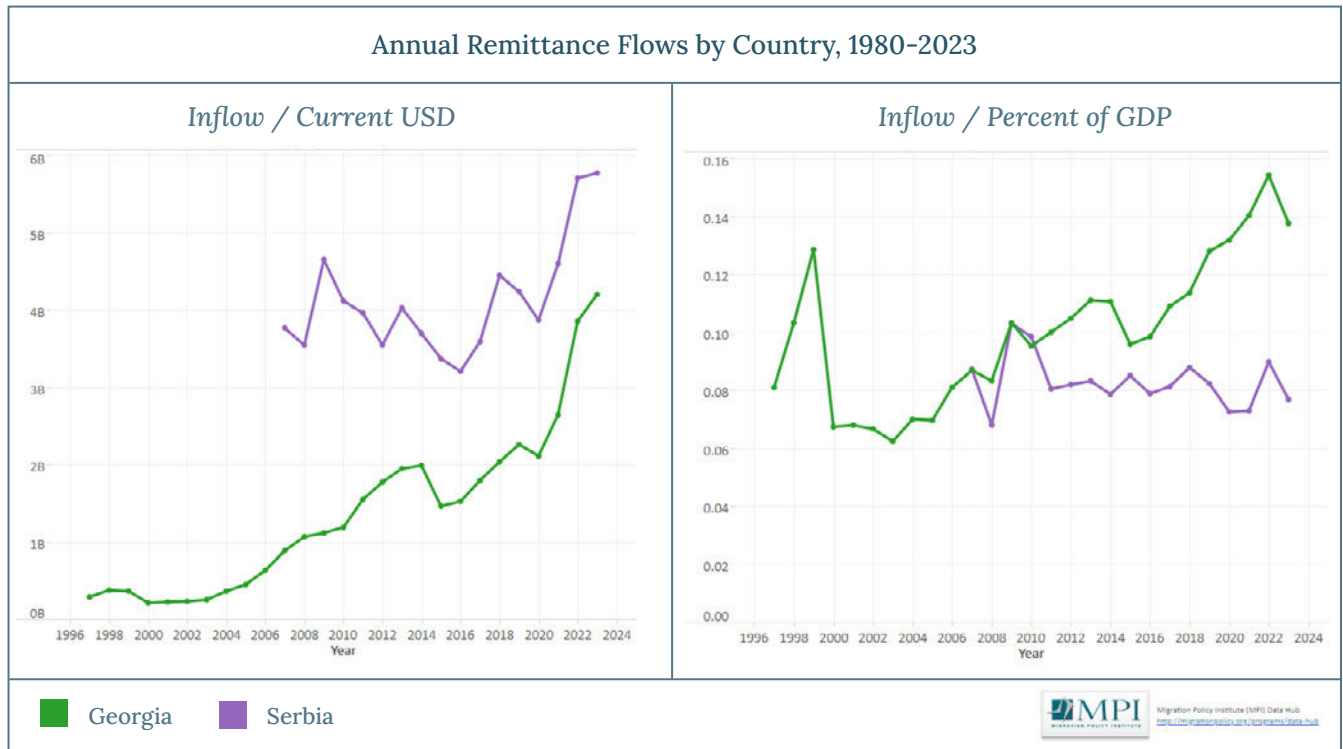
Yet these worrying developments contrasted with symbolic progress in others: for example, Serbia has held Belgrade Pride Weeks, previously targeted by official bans and extreme violence, since 2014. Moreover, Vučić appointed an [openly gay female prime minister](#), Ana Brnabic, in 2017, which his government repeatedly used to shield itself from criticism about rights restrictions. Brnabic, of course, proved to be as loyal to Vučić and his conservative policies as others in his cabinet.

The pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine have hardened Serbia's policies. Vučić used the pandemic to declare emergency rule, introduce a military curfew, and crack down on opponents. He took credit for getting vaccines from Russia, China, and the EU. He cast these as the benefits of a “balanced” foreign policy. Serbia has carefully managed its distance from the EU since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. It has partly applied EU sanctions but also welcomed hundreds of thousands of Russians, boosting domestic consumption and the economy. Vučić is trying to [court](#) Moscow with the help of Aleksandar Vulin, a U.S.-sanctioned former intelligence chief. At the same time, Belgrade vies for the support of Brussels, Paris, and Berlin and shows the Europeans and US that he holds the keys to the Balkan stability by staging periodic escalations in Kosovo.

Lessons for Georgia?

For Georgians, similarities with Serbian developments in the past 12 years abound. A brief glance at the current Georgian and Serbian government mouthpieces is even more telling: Vučić's government has been pushing conspiracy theories, tagging civil society as spies on foreign pay, and increasingly channeling traditional religious conservatism. Most commentary about the war in Ukraine comes from Russia, involving current and retired Russian military.

In the past decade, the country lost an [estimated](#)



350 thousand people to emigration, mostly women and young people of working age. As in Georgia, Serbia heavily relies on remittances (mostly from Europe; see graph above) to keep afloat impoverished suburban and rural areas where the official social protection net is scant and public services sub-optimal—people who often vote for the ruling party to retain control.

Just like the Georgian Dream recently, SNS has pursued the foreign policy “balancing,” inviting Russia and, especially, China to make strategic investments, which are then likely funneled into the clientelist networks [through corrupt schemes](#).

The state institutions and courts are captured, and even massive protests – like the recent ones in Serbia against lithium mines, or against violence, or the one against the “agents law” in Georgia – seemingly fail to bring long-term change.

Yet, there are differences. For once, there is a difference in the starting point: Serbs have legitimate trauma associated with the Belgrade bombings that makes them highly skeptical of Western institutions. The country holds the key to fragile

stability in the Balkans, and keeping it broadly on track toward the EU is in the pragmatic interest of Brussels, Berlin, and Paris, among others. Vučić has cultivated a close relationship with the outgoing EU enlargement commissioner Olivér Várhelyi – just like the Georgian Dream did – to the extent that the Commissioner was accused of [embellishing](#) the EU reports to Serbia’s favor. Georgia has no such pivotal role, and its credibility with the EU was primarily based on its status as the frontrunner in reforms – which has by now all but evaporated.

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Serbian leadership is also positioned to provide significant “carrots” – investment opportunities and subsidies, strategic lithium reserves, and promises to normalize relations with Kosovo and not undermine Bosnia’s territorial integrity – things that Georgian leadership lacks.

The only significant difference working in favor of Georgia's European future is the position of its citizens. In Georgia - 86% support EU membership.

The only significant difference working in favor of Georgia's European future is the position of its citizens. In Georgia - 86% [support](#) EU membership. By contrast, according to [recent polls](#), 46% of Serbs say Russia is their most important ally, and only 40% said they would vote for EU membership if a referendum were held. Thirty-four percent would vote 'No'.

Reservoir of Hope... and Despair

Perhaps Georgians can convert their strong opinion into a political choice. A dramatic difference of opinion from the Serbs regarding the importance of joining the EU, could still prove to be a tipping point. Still, the electoral process can be hacked, and the outcome remains to be seen in October.

If anything, Serbian experience tells us that relying on push or pull factors from the EU to compensate for internal political shortfalls decisively is a naïve hope. Authoritarian populist regimes have found ways to hack into the EU decision-making processes, primarily by hiding behind the “sovereign-

ty” banner (a trick that the Georgian Dream has taken up) and by appealing to so-called “pragmatic” – geostrategic, economic, and business – interests in bilateral and multilateral relations. If they can keep the domestic protest insulated, circumscribed to street protests without access to political decision-making mechanisms and official positions, there is little that the EU can tangibly do.

Relying on push or pull factors from the EU to compensate for internal political shortfalls decisively is a naïve hope. Authoritarian populist regimes have found ways to hack into the EU decision-making processes, primarily by hiding behind the “sovereignty” banner.

Serbia is at the heart of Europe. Germany, Austria, and other neighbors want to see it in the EU as quickly as possible, which gives President Vučić ample room for bargaining. In other words, integrating Western Balkans as a regional entity is in the Union's strategic interest, whereas Georgia is on the periphery and increasingly isolated.

If the Georgian Dream decides to go “full Vučić,” Georgia's EU perspective would be definitively dead and buried ■

Georgia's Cognitive Battlefield: A Case Study in Authoritarian Propaganda

By effectively transforming state capture into a [pattern](#) of electoral manipulation—primarily via intimidation and vote buying—the Georgian Dream (GD) has the potential to mobilize roughly one-third of voters in its favor. Following recent waves of mass protests against the regime's openly pro-Russian policies, it has become clear that convincing the remaining strongly pro-Western electorate to support the regime is close to impossible.

The Georgian Dream has the potential to mobilize roughly one-third of voters in its favor.

With unprecedented polarization defining the political landscape, the Georgian Dream's key objective for the pivotal 2024 elections is to maintain low voter turnout among those unaffected by their manipulation patterns. The regime's pre-election

strategy is characterized by aggressive [intimidation campaigns](#) on opponents through hate speech and calls for violence, [reinforced](#) by physical attacks while labeling any critical individuals or organizations as enemies of the state and [threatening](#) prosecution after elections.

Blatantly going against the facts and evidence, the Georgian Dream's pre-election rhetoric is an a blend of contradictory narratives grounded in conspiracy theories designed to create confusion, nihilism, and, ultimately, the political disengagement of undecided and inactive voters. Drawing from standard authoritarian propaganda tactics, as [noted](#) by Hannah Arendt, the aim is not to foster belief in a particular truth but to generate uncertainty and disorientation. When people are bombarded with outright lies and conflicting messages, they lose their sense of direction and, more importantly, their capacity for action. Similar dis-



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information and propaganda practices in Russia and its proxy authoritarian satellites have proven to be a powerful tool for controlling societies.

To outvote the regime in the 2024 elections, one crucial strategy lies in motivating significantly more pro-Western voters to mobilize despite the regime's election manipulation patterns to demobilize. This requires untangling the toxic web of propaganda narratives and bringing clarity to Georgia's information ecosystem. It is essential to demonstrate the destructive consequences of the Georgian Dream's declared and intended policies as well as its pre-election promises. By exposing these realities with facts and evidence, voters can be motivated to proactively make informed choices toward safeguarding Georgia's democratic and European trajectory.

Strategic Trinity

The Georgian Dream's pre-election narrative has been built around a strategic trinity: peace, traditional values, and European integration, albeit in a dignified way.

The Georgian Dream's pre-election narrative has been built around a strategic trinity: peace, traditional values, and European integration, albeit in a dignified way. These three core messages form the foundation of their campaign, each having its depth yet intricately woven into interconnected narratives. Beneath this framework lies a complex web of sub-narratives and supporting messages that appeal to various voter segments. Often, these narratives are contradictory and mutually exclusive.

At the core of the Georgian Dream's propaganda is the claim of being the only government in Georgia's history that has maintained peace and avoided the loss of the territories. The ruling party as-

serts that, unlike previous administrations, it has neither led the country into war nor compromised Georgia's sovereignty by succumbing to Western pressure. This positioning is framed as a testament to their steadfast commitment to Georgia's national interests and values amidst geopolitical turbulence and external pressures. This campaign message has recently been stretched to the level of absurdity. The Georgian Dream erected billboards depicting the contrast between the Ukrainian sites destroyed by Russia (such as the Mariupol theater) and peaceful Georgian sites (such as schools and churches). Despite the outcry on social media, GD [responded](#) that showing the contrast between the consequences of war and peace was a legitimate political tactic.

The ruling party further emphasizes its policies of peace and the preservation of Georgian identity as central to its strategy for achieving "dignified" European integration. This messaging taps into nationalistic sentiment, portraying the Georgian Dream as balancing national pride with its goal of joining "real Europe" on its own terms—without compromising Georgia's sovereignty or cultural heritage.

However, the 14 September speech by Bidzina Ivanishvili, honorary chair and number one on the party list, marked a strategic turning point. In his address at a rally in Gori, Ivanishvili once again blamed Saakashvili and his government for starting the 2008 war but, this time explicitly accused the West of directing Saakashvili while omitting Russia's role in the conflict. He went further, apologizing on behalf of Georgia to the Ossetian people for initiating bloodshed between the "brotherly nations."

This narrative shift dramatically repositions the Georgian Dream's messaging, emphasizing "peace at all costs" and sidelining the other two components of the trinity—traditional values and European integration. Most notably, Ivanishvili announced

plans for a mass Nuremberg-style prosecution of the “collective United National Movement (UNM),” a term the Georgian Dream uses to denote all opposition parties, civil society organizations, and critical media outlets.

The message of “traditional values” resonates strongly with Georgia’s conservative and Orthodox voters, its recent pro-Russian foreign policy shift reframes the West, rather than Russia, as the hostile force threatening Georgia’s security, identity, and values. This rhetoric justifies initiatives like the Russian-style law on foreign agents, which was intended to curb “malign Western influence” in Georgia. However, justifying the de facto freezing of Georgia’s European integration process, particularly after introducing such anti-democratic measures, has proven increasingly difficult—even for the regime, which relies on aggressive disinformation campaigns.

The disinformation strategy now depends on attacking any individual or institution that criticizes the Georgian Dream, labeling them as part of the “collective UNM.”

The Georgian Dream’s disinformation strategy depends on attacking any individual or institution that criticizes the Georgian Dream, labeling them as part of the “collective UNM.” This creates a strategic loop of disinformation aimed at purging the country of so-called enemies of the state, all under the guise of making the necessary conditions for peace and “true democracy” which the ruling party claims will ultimately lead to European integration. This shift in the narrative not only highlights the Georgian Dream’s disturbing messaging but also raises significant concerns about the repressive course of action after the pivotal 2024 elections, turning the pre-election environment into a battle for survival.

Peace – Strategic Pillar of the Regime’s Propaganda

As is typical for Russia’s proxies around the globe, the Georgian Dream has translated the strategic narrative into the local context, adopting rhetoric that frames the West as the force behind a “global war party” trying to pull Georgia into a “second front” against Russia. The party also accuses the West of financing and facilitating a revolution in Georgia, which perfectly aligns with Russia’s propaganda narrative, blaming the United States and the West for initiating regime change in countries that do not obey their orders to initiate or involve themselves in the conflicts. The Georgian Dream has closely coordinated these narratives with those of Russia, directly amplifying anti-Western messages in Georgia’s information ecosystem. By doing so, they reinforce the Kremlin’s stance that the United States and its allies, not Russia, provoked wars in Georgia and Ukraine. This synchronization between the Georgian Dream’s messaging and Moscow’s broader geopolitical agenda highlights how Georgia’s ruling party has echoed and extended Russia’s disinformation campaign within the country, diminishing the country’s Western orientation.

The Georgian Dream, in parallel to accusing the West of “dragging Georgia into a war,” also accuses the United National Movement and its affiliates of wanting to engage Georgia in a conflict. The “second front” narrative is somewhat inconsistent, though, as the Georgian Dream fails to explain why the West would be interested in opening a second front in Georgia, especially considering the strategic and logistical challenges this would entail. In such a scenario, the West would have to assist both Ukraine and Georgia, and due to Georgia’s small geography, weak armed forces, and low preparedness, it would be difficult for the country to distract the Russian military from the Ukrainian war theater. Moreover, such a conflict would likely

result in Georgia's rapid and complete Anschluss and severing of its ties with the West. This outcome would deeply damage Western interests in the wider Black Sea region, making the narrative unconvincing and contradicting the Georgian Dream's interests by reminding society that Russia is the primary threat to Georgia's statehood and national interest.

By framing Saakashvili as the instigator of the war, the Georgian government undermines the country's legal standing to claim territorial integrity.

Recently, one of the most damaging narratives for Georgia's national interests—that Saakashvili and his government initiated the 2008 war at the West's behest—has gained momentum. This narrative strikes a severe blow to Georgia's national interests and undermines long-term hopes for the peaceful reintegration of the occupied territories. By framing Saakashvili as the instigator of the war, the Georgian government undermines the country's legal standing to claim territorial integrity. Such a statement from Georgia's political leadership suggests an acknowledgment that Russia's "peace enforcement" operation was legitimate, leading to the logical de facto recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

This messaging aligns directly with the narrative pushed by Sergey Lavrov during his visit to Sokhumi in October 2009 when he [stated](#) that Saakashvili's regime started the war and Russia responded in full compliance with the UN Charter. Ivanishvili's remarks mirror the Kremlin's long-standing claim that Russian forces entered Georgia to restrain aggressors under the pretext of a peace enforcement operation. Such an alignment of narratives not only damages Georgia's reputation but also undermines the legal and moral grounds for opposing Russian occupation. It is no surprise that

Russian propagandist Margarita Simonian and long-time Russian ex-negotiator with Georgia and now a senator, Grigori Karasin, openly [welcomed](#) Ivanishvili's statement.

Expected Consequences of the Strategic Shift

Ivanishvili's statements signal the effective end of the non-recognition policy, a stance that has been upheld mainly through solid support from Georgia's Western partners. The rise of anti-Western rhetoric and the increasing isolation of Georgia from the West will undoubtedly harm these efforts in the long term. Furthermore, even if Georgia's strategic partners continue to allocate diplomatic resources to maintain the burden of the non-recognition policy despite the blame directed at the West for allegedly provoking Saakashvili into starting the war (in line with Russia's claims), the Georgian Dream's position will still undermine the legal and moral foundations of this policy.

Ivanishvili's narrative on the 2008 war shifts the focus by downplaying Russia's role and framing the conflict as primarily between Georgians and Ossetians. While criticizing Saakashvili's government for falling into Russia's trap isn't new, apologizing for the war without mentioning Russia as a key player marks a significant departure. This change may be aimed at restoring ties with Russia or even recognizing sovereignty for Abkhazia and Tskhinvali in one form or another.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, still adhering to the long-held non-recognition policy, will have a problem adjusting to this new narrative. Their recent [statement](#), perhaps by inertia, still condemns Russia's continued occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. However, as political leadership moves toward the new stance, Georgian diplomats will be forced to contradict national interests on the global stage.

A Positive Scenario

The Georgian Dream has been promoting the need to gain a constitutional majority, arguing that its pre-election trinity – protecting family values, restoring territorial integrity, and abolishing the “collective UNM – will be impossible without it. With this, the Georgian Dream is working to impose a new social contract aimed at legitimizing the destruction of democracy and furthering its anti-Western agenda. If the regime succeeds in maintaining power after the 2024 elections, Russia’s objective of re-establishing its sphere of influence in Georgia will be complete.

The only way to prevent Georgia from crossing the point of no return, avoid irreparable damage to its national interests, and avert catastrophic consequences for its statehood is to consolidate a synchronized strategy between Georgia’s pro-democracy stakeholders and the country’s strategic partners.

The Georgian Dream’s narratives reveal weaknesses by ignoring key facts on the ground, such as the ongoing “[borderization](#)” process, where Russian forces continue moving occupation boundaries deeper into Georgian-controlled territories. In addition to silently losing control over these areas, Georgian citizens are regularly [kidnapped](#) and often [killed](#), further undermining the government’s claims of maintaining peace and sovereignty. Moreover, the Georgian Dream refuses to take responsibility for meeting the transparent [requirements](#) necessary for advancing European integration, framing its inaction as resistance to Western pressure. Instead, the regime has facilitated the expansion of Russian interests in Georgia, advancing Russia’s hybrid warfare strategy. By increasing [dependency](#) on Russia, [undermining](#) the defense sector, and [consolidating](#) autocratic rule, the Georgian Dream has isolated Georgia from its strategic partners, blocked its EU integration pro-

cess, and failed to protect the country from Russia’s growing influence.

Given the blurred and contaminated information ecosystem, these interconnections are not always evident to the general public. Therefore, it is crucial for pro-democracy stakeholders to coordinate nationwide, evidence-based awareness campaigns to take advantage of the regime’s weaknesses and expose these realities.

The United States and key European partners should engage strategically to ensure free and fair elections in Georgia.

At the same time, the United States and key European partners should engage strategically to ensure free and fair elections in Georgia. Every aggressive action against the democratic process must be promptly condemned, not just through statements but through widening and deepening the reach of sanctions. Impunity for anti-democratic actions emboldens the regime and encourages further malpractice while also undermining the narrative of pro-democracy forces and eroding voter confidence.

Beyond solid political engagement, it is essential to establish effective operational mechanisms to prevent election rigging. Observer missions should have a clear mandate and practical tools to address well-known election manipulation patterns. Evidence of electoral malpractice must be systematically collected, documented, and reflected in monitoring reports—noting the cumulative effects of isolated incidents on the overall election outcome.

Need for Clarity and Action

In the current phase of escalation orchestrated by the Georgian Dream, sanctions have become the West’s last remaining tool to counter the regime’s

anti-democratic trajectory. The European Union's [statement](#) about the potential revocation of visa-free travel is a crucial narrative that must be reinforced. It is essential to clarify to the confused segments of Georgian society that a country ruled by a regime under international sanctions cannot advance on the European path. Moreover, it should become more evident in the pre-election discourse that as democracy will inevitably continue to erode under the Georgian Dream's leadership, the rollback of progress in EU integration—such as visa-free travel and candidate status—cannot be sustained if the regime remains in power.

The West must expand targeted sanctions on the political leadership and civil servants responsible for violence and corruption.

Therefore, the West must expand targeted sanctions on the political leadership and civil servants responsible for violence and corruption. Such actions, particularly the ones targeted against Ivashvili and his close circle, will weaken the Georgian Dream's repressive tactics, limit the power of those complicit in the regime's misconduct, and reassure the Georgian people that they will not be left to face Russia and its violent proxies alone. The United States has already made steps in this direction, unlike the EU and its member states.

Only through coordinated political and practical measures can fact-based counter-disinformation campaigns effectively challenge the regime's propaganda, creating the potential to disrupt well-prepared government narratives and re-establish trust in Georgia's democratic process. With only a few weeks to go, the winner of this information war will carry the elections, notwithstanding real public support ■

NGOs Under the Gun

The first round of the battle between the Georgian Dream (GD) and Georgian civil society unfolded in early 2023 when the government came out swinging with the “Transparency of Foreign Influence” bill. This proposed legislation aimed to label NGOs and media outlets receiving over 20% of their funding abroad as “foreign agents.” The ruling party hoped this punch would weaken civil society by branding them with a stigmatizing label reminiscent of Russian laws. However, NGOs, supported by mass protests and international condemnation, parried the blow. With the pressure mounting, Georgian Dream was forced to retreat and withdraw the bill in March 2023, signaling a win for civil society in Round 1.

In Round 2, which occurred in the spring of 2024, Georgian Dream returned to the ring with renewed determination. This time, they reintroduced the foreign agent law and successfully passed it despite strong domestic and international opposition. The law, now enforced, compels NGOs to register as agents of foreign influence if they receive significant foreign funding, a move that the government framed as necessary for transparency

but which critics saw as an attack on democracy. Despite massive protests, the government secured victory in this round by pushing the bill through parliament, even overriding a presidential veto.

Although the Georgian Dream claimed victory in Round 2, civil society wasn't knocked out. Many NGOs found ways to dodge the government's punch by registering abroad or restructuring as private companies, entities not yet covered by the law. Some NGOs complied with the registration but made it clear that they strongly opposed the new regulations. Impressively, [less than 3%](#) of the affected organizations registered under the law, showcasing the resilience of Georgia's civil society even in the face of such aggressive legal challenges.

In September 2024, the Government initiated a third round, this time with a new, more insidious tactic, using the Anti-Corruption Bureau and judicial reinterpretations of the Law on Political Associations of Citizens to attack NGOs.



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But in September 2024, the government initiated a third round, this time with a new, more insidious tactic, using the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) and judicial reinterpretations of the [Law on Political Associations of Citizens \(LPAC\)](#) to attack NGOs. After facing setbacks in the first two rounds, the government shifted its strategy, this time showcasing that the whole state machinery could be used to attack the NGOs.

The third round also showcased how the state institutions are indeed captured and politically subordinated to the Georgian Dream. If during rounds 1 and 2, Parliament, dominated by the Georgian Dream and the state-controlled media (Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, and PosTV), were used to attack the NGOs, this time, the attack came through the Court and the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB).

The Law

The LPAC was adopted in 1997 and has undergone numerous changes since then. The law regulates not only the activities of political parties but also the financial transparency-related activities of entities that “have declared political goal and use relevant financial and material resources for this purpose.”

In 2013, after the Georgian Dream came to power, they introduced an amendment to the law, which specified what the “declared political goal” meant. According to the change from 29 July 2013, the declared political goal was defined as a “factual circumstance when it is clear that a concrete person has a declared goal of coming to power through the elections.” The amendment also specified that the statement should be made publicly and should be aimed at forming public opinion.

This definition made sense, especially for the Georgian Dream, which was subjected to considerable political pressure during the 2012 pre-election campaign.

In December 2011, the UNM [adopted](#) an amendment to the LPAC, which was widely criticized, as it also applied to the persons “related directly...” or indirectly to the political party, is under a party control through a different form, or has declared political goals and objectives.” This broad interpretation effectively gave the Control Chamber (State Audit Office) power to apply the LPAC to any critical NGO or those NGOs which employed persons affiliated with sympathetic to the then newly formed Georgian Dream. Moreover, the regulations on political party financing were applied retroactively. The changes banned political parties from accepting donations from legal entities, increased the annual individual donation cap to GEL 60,000, and introduced stricter reporting requirements. Political parties were required to return unspent funds received from legal entities or face forfeiting them to the state. These reforms came in response to donations from opposition parties linked to billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili and aimed to restrict their financial activities.

At that time, the NGOs [criticized](#) these amendments and engaged in a popular and influential “This Concerns You” campaign. As a result of pressure from the Western embassies and NGOs, the UNM and the State Audit Office did not interpret the law so that the NGO activities would be either hampered or their finances scrutinized, similar to the political parties.

So, after the GD came to power in 2012, on 29 July 2013, many changes adopted in 2011 were scrapped, and the definition of “having political goals” was added to the law. According to the definition, “having political goals” meant a declared desire to come to power through the elections. For the LPAC to be applied to such entities, they were supposed to also finance activities related to their declared political goal.

The Court

On September 17, 2024 this long-standing straightforward, non-ambiguous definition of the “person with declared political goals” was changed by the Appeals Court. According to the new interpretation, the “declared political goal” is no longer aimed at “coming to power through the elections.” It is sufficient to make statements in favor or against other political entities. The test of “wanting to come to power through elections” was changed overnight to a test of verbal support in favor or against any political entity.

On September 17, 2024, this long-standing straightforward, non-ambiguous definition of the “person with declared political goals” was changed by the Appeals Court.

The fact that the Georgian courts are politically controlled is no secret, and this journal has written about this [extensively](#). Major international watchdogs and Georgian nongovernmental organizations have consistently reported on political control of the judiciary and the existence of a “clan” loyal to the Georgian Dream. Major appointments in the Appeals and Supreme Courts, stacking of the Constitutional Court, and dubious decisions with clear political motivations led to the US [sanctioning](#) Georgian judges in 2023 and the EU [suspending](#) the EUR 75 million loan unless effective judicial reform was conducted. One of the significant requirements of the EU for progress towards the candidate status was the independence of the judiciary.

The Anti-Corruption Bureau

The Appeals Court’s decision paved the way for the Anti-Corruption Bureau to give further interpretation of the law and apply the law on political parties to those NGOs considered “enemies” and

in cahoots with the “radical opposition” by the Georgian Dream.

The Appeals Court’s decision paved the way for the Anti-Corruption Bureau to give another interpretation of the law and apply the law on political parties to those NGOs considered “enemies” and in cahoots with “radical opposition” by the Georgian Dream.

A week after the decision of the appeals court, on 24 September, the ACB [issued](#) a decision effectively applying the LPAC to Transparency International Georgia and its director, Eka Gigauri. TI Georgia, a long-standing watchdog with a solid international reputation, has come under the continuous attack of the Georgian Dream for being politicized, having political goals, and being an extension of the “collective UNM.” However, until September 2024, these verbal attacks, pro-government media reports, and demonization did not affect the activities of TI Georgia; the decision of the ACB imposed restrictions on TI, which, if enforced, would have made the organization completely defunct.

The Restrictions

The ACB’s interpretation LPAC led to the application of political party restrictions to Transparency International. The Bureau reinterpreted a key clause in the law, which required both “political goals” and financial expenditures for those goals. They argued that having political goals alone was sufficient, even without financial activities. Essentially, the word “and” was understood not as cumulative but as “and others,” allowing for the broader application of restrictions without financial proof.

This interpretation by the Anti-Corruption Bureau enabled the imposition of financial and administrative requirements on NGOs, treating them as

if they were political parties. The Bureau considered it enough if NGO representatives' statements aligned with those of political parties or were directed against another party, regardless of a political goal (willingness to come to power through elections) and financial involvement. Transparency International was required to provide detailed financial disclosures, including opening special accounts. This scrutiny created a legal precedent, forcing not just TI but also other NGOs in the future to comply with regulations meant for political entities, severely restricting their operations.

This interpretation by the Anti-Corruption Bureau enabled the imposition of financial and administrative requirements on NGOs, treating them as if they were political parties.

In the third round, the government wielded the law to strangle civil society's operational capacity. The interpretation of political activities under the law can potentially include a wide range of civil society work, such as hosting public discussions or offering legal aid, potentially labeling these activities as politically charged. This legal tactic allows the state to pressure NGOs into compliance or financial ruin, significantly threatening their ability to function independently.

According to the LPAC, the political parties and the entities with political goals have other severe restrictions, including the inability to receive any funding from abroad.

Moreover, according to the LPAC, the political parties and the entities with political goals have other severe restrictions, including the inability to receive any funding from abroad. The parties can only accept donations from Georgian private and legal entities. Any other funding, whether in the

form of a grant or any other form, is considered a donation. Sanctions in the of illegal donations are strict and include either the returning of the foreign donation to the donor or confiscation of the donation to the state budget and a fine of two times the donation.

Further, according to the law, once classified, NGOs are obligated to open special bank accounts, similar to political parties, where all financial transactions linked to their supposed electoral goals will be closely monitored. The Bureau may cite the Transparency International case as a legal precedent to establish a framework for such oversight. The precedent of soliciting financial data from banks suggests that the Bureau may also investigate NGO members' or affiliates' financial transactions before officially assigning them electoral status. The ACB can also retroactively demand financial records for activities conducted before the assignment of the electoral status, as happened with TI Georgia, further increasing administrative pressure on NGOs.

The ACB's discretion, based on previous court decisions, effectively allows the ACB to implement the sanctions without judicial review.

The ACB's discretion, based on previous court decisions, effectively allows it to implement the sanctions without judicial review. While NGOs can appeal these decisions, the legal process is skewed in favor of the Bureau. Courts are unlikely to suspend the Bureau's decisions during the appeals process, as evidenced by the case of TI. NGOs must challenge both the classification and the resulting obligations simultaneously, creating a heavy legal burden.

Lastly, the fines and potential asset freezes linked to these cases create immediate financial pressures for civil society organizations, even before

legal appeals can be exhausted. The Bureau's ability to request information from banks and other institutions further complicates the situation, as NGOs might find themselves entangled in a web of financial investigations.

Backlash and Backtracking

The international community reacted forcefully to the Georgian Anti-Corruption Bureau's (ACB) decision to label Transparency International Georgia as an entity with "declared electoral goals," interpreting this as an attempt to hinder civil society and suppress election monitoring.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) co-rapporteurs [expressed concern](#) that this decision undermined public trust in the electoral process. They called it "unacceptable" and urged the government to ensure that respected organizations, like Transparency International, can observe elections without interference.

U.S. Senators from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, including Jim Risch (IR-D) and Ben Cardin (D-MD), also [criticized](#) the ACB's actions. They particularly noted that Eka Gigauri, the director of Transparency International Georgia, was being punished for her [testimony](#) on democratic repression in the US Senate. They highlighted how autocratic governments misuse such laws to silence independent voices.

Similarly, the European Union, through spokesperson Peter Stano, [urged](#) the Georgian authorities to restore a favorable environment for civil society, stressing the need for the full political and operational independence of the Anti-Corruption Bureau. He reiterated the EU's support for a "free and open civil society" and the necessity of keeping civil society organizations independent from political interference, especially before elections.

All statements underscored the broader concern that the ACB's decision was not just a legal move but a political strategy to weaken civil society and suppress its role in safeguarding democratic processes. Moreover, these statements made it clear that such treatment of the election monitoring NGOs would jeopardize the legitimacy of the October 2024 Parliamentary elections.

Hint about the possibility of not recognizing the election outcome as legitimate was the straw that broke the camel's back.

The hint about the possibility of not recognizing the election outcome as legitimate was the straw that broke the camel's back. On 1 October, the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Kobakhidze, [issued](#) a statement in which he defended the Anti-Corruption Bureau's decision to designate Transparency International-Georgia as having "declared electoral objectives," citing the organization's long-standing political agenda. However, he urged the Bureau to reverse its decision, warning that such classifications could lead to external manipulation. Kobakhidze acknowledged TI's criticism of the government but emphasized that their impact on the October elections would be minimal due to the organization's diminished credibility in the eyes of the public. He called for restraint in future classifications ahead of the polls.

As expected, the next day, on 2 October, the ACB [reversed](#) its decision to grant the entity's status with political goals to Transparency International. The absurdity of this saga is that the request of the Prime Minister was legally unjustified since, if qualified as an entity with political goals, the status can be removed only if the conditions because of which the status was granted are no longer in existence. According to the Law, the ACB can issue a new decision once the conditions are no longer

present. The PM and the ACB chief interpreted this provision as a discretion to grant/remove the status to any entity by selectively applying the law. The swift reversal of the decision showed that the ACB was not independent and its actions were politically motivated.

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The independence of the ACB has been questioned since its creation. In 2022, the European Commission, when assessing Georgia's readiness to receive an EU candidate status, [issued](#) a list of 12 priorities to be implemented by Georgia to move forward on the EU track. Of those 12, the fourth priority was to "strengthen the independence of its Anti-Corruption Agency bringing together all key anti-corruption functions, in particular, to address high-level corruption cases rigorously." In December 2023, the Venice Commission [issued](#) a report on Georgia's anti-corruption legislation, arguing that the "current institutional design does not provide for a sufficient degree of independence of the Anti-Corruption Bureau." In the 2023 Enlargement report, the European Commission called on Georgian authorities to implement the Venice Commission recommendations.

The coalition of Georgian NGOs, which has monitored the implementation of the 12 conditions since 2023, has repeatedly [stressed](#) that the Prime Minister's appointment of the ACB head, the lack of proper investigative functions, and the lack of real independence and neutrality were serious problems. For this reason, the NGOs qualified the anti-corruption priority as "partially fulfilled."

Strategic Implications for NGOs

The government and the ACB's backtracking from destroying Transparency International might leave the aftertaste of victory. However, the strategic implications of the court's interpretation and the ACB's discretion are far-reaching. Effectively, if the Georgian Dream stays in power, this instrument can be used at any moment to undermine the work of civil society organizations.

The Anti-Corruption Bureau can systematically attack NGOs, labeling their advocacy work as political activity and exposing them to legal and financial liabilities designed for political parties.

Using the above-described legal tools, the Anti-Corruption Bureau can systematically attack NGOs, labeling their advocacy work as political activity and exposing them to legal and financial liabilities designed for political parties. This approach will not only restrict their operational capacity but also deter foreign donors and partners from engaging with these organizations, given the risk of their funds being confiscated or their activities deemed illegal.

The Bureau's broad discretionary powers mean that even minor reporting errors or compliance issues could result in severe consequences, such as asset freezes or punitive fines. For NGOs, this creates an atmosphere of permanent threat, making it difficult to operate freely under the gun.

As Chekhov's famous principle suggests, "if in the first act, you have hung a gun on the wall, then in the following one, it will be fired." The Bureau's actions suggest that this "gun" could fire at any moment, leaving NGOs constantly at risk ■

It's the Foreign Policy, Stupid?!

The mantra “It's the Economy, Stupid!” coined by Bill Clinton's campaign strategist Bill Carville during the 1992 campaign became a catchphrase denoting that what voters care about most is the economy. In the 2024 Georgian elections, however, the major pre-election debate is about the country's foreign and security policy.

According to a [recent poll](#), 50% of Georgians report being unemployed, 78% actively seek work, 57% of households are in debt, and 58% have a family living abroad. Despite these pressing domestic issues, probably for the first time in Georgia's recent history, geopolitics, European integration, and foreign policy have become primary election issues for the political parties.

The ruling and opposition parties agree on one thing: the general election is a referendum.

The ruling and opposition parties agree on one thing: the general election is a referendum. However, the “referendum questions” differ significantly.

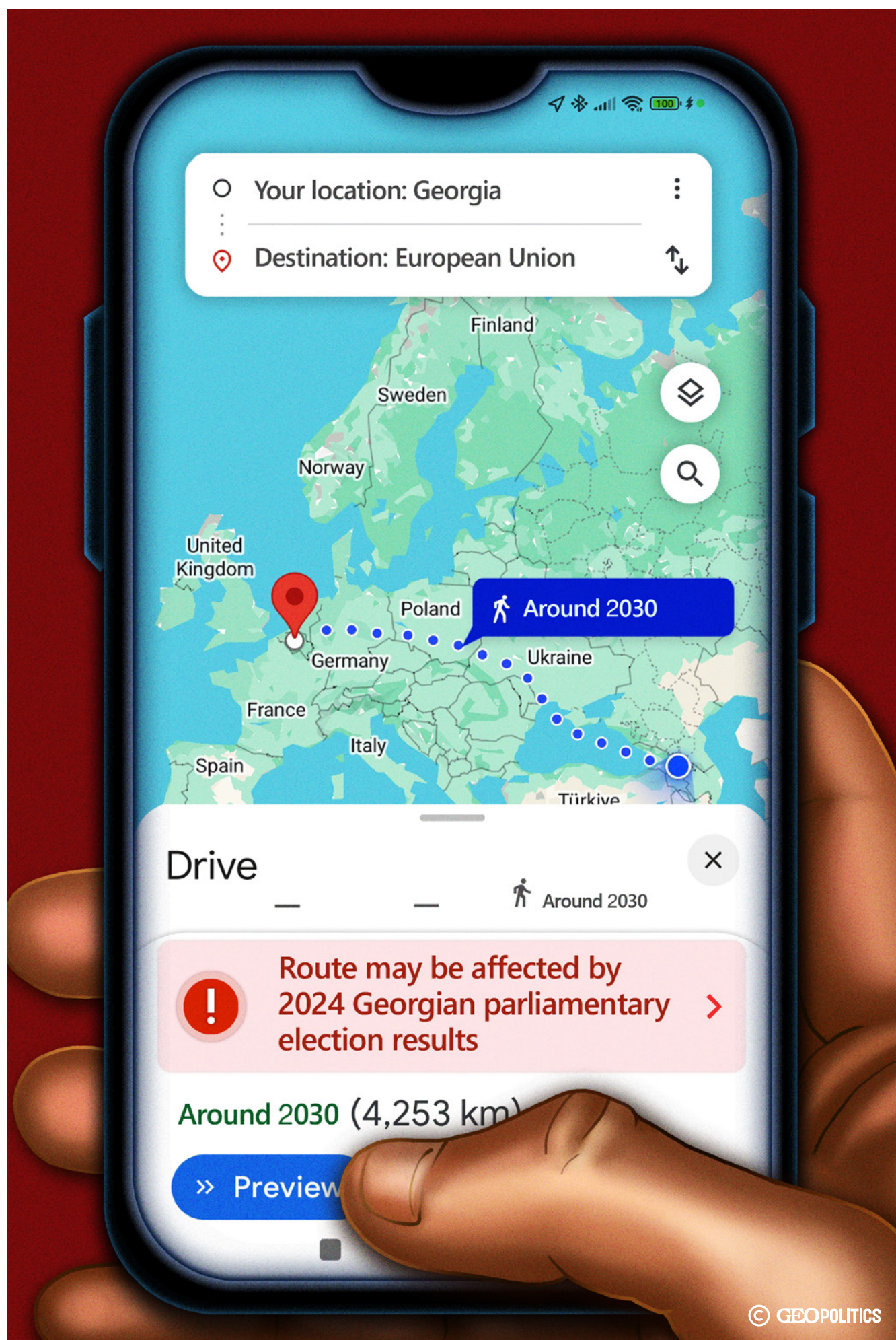
The opposition frames it as a choice between the European Union and Russia or between “European prosperity” and the “Russian swamp.” The ruling party, leveraging the trauma of the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia and the ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine, encourages voters to choose between Western interventionism and the risk of war. The Georgian Dream (GD) presents itself as the guarantor of peace, emphasizing that under its leadership, the country has experienced no wars since independence. Unlike the opposition parties, the GD campaigns on a platform of mending ties with Russia while promising to hold a “Georgian Nuremberg Trial” where the collective United National Movement (UNM), including various opposition parties, NGOs, and media, would face severe legal consequences.

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In this article, we look deeper at the foreign policy visions of the major parties. A detailed foreign policy-related questionnaire was sent to all five political parties/centers: the Georgian Dream, Unity – National Movement, Coalition for Change, Strong Georgia, and For Georgia. The GD and the UNM did not provide written answers; therefore, the article uses their public statements and campaign rhetoric for the analysis. The remaining three opposition parties' written responses and public statements are combined to analyze their foreign policy visions.

The Primacy of the EU

Rhetorically, all political parties in Georgia, both the ruling and opposition, support the country's EU accession process. All major opposition parties (except for the GD) signed the [Georgian Charter](#), initiated by the President of Georgia, which commits the signatories to fulfill the nine points of the European Commission's 2023 recommendations. Therefore, it would be fair to say that the swift implementation of the EU's conditionalities is a commitment the opposition parties have undertaken.

Although the Georgian Dream is mainly responsible for [halting](#) Georgia's progress toward EU membership, it continues to assert that Georgia will join the EU on its terms and that the accession will be through a dignified process, not an EU *diktat*. This approach disregards the existence of EU accession [Copenhagen Criteria](#) and [Article 2](#) of the EU Treaty, which outlines the European values that member states and candidate countries must uphold.

For the GD, the EU membership process has become a burden, but abandoning it openly would amount to political suicide.

Various [polls](#) show that public trust in the GD's commitment to a pro-European policy is dwindling.

With EU integration backed by around 80% of the population, the GD finds itself in a precarious position. While the party recognizes that fulfilling the nine steps—such as judicial reform, deoligarchization, and combating corruption—would likely lead to its loss of power due to abandoning the entrenched control it holds over the state institutions, it is also compelled to appease the electorate by paying lip service to the idea of EU accession. For the GD, the EU membership process has become a burden, but abandoning it openly would amount to political suicide. Thus, the GD's banners, political ads, and public statements still focus on European integration but emphasize resisting EU pressure and maintaining sovereignty and independence. “With dignity to EU” – is the punchline of the Georgian Dream.

The main talking point during the 2024 campaign is not the GD's previous achievements on the European part but its “success” in resisting EU pressure and still achieving EU candidate status.

In previous elections, the Georgian Dream used to portray itself as the political force that brought Georgia closer to the European Union. During the GD's time in office, Georgia signed the Association Agreement, which includes the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), secured visa liberalization, and submitted an application for EU membership. However, a closer look reveals that negotiations on the Association Agreement and DCFTA were largely concluded before the GD came to power, with around 90% of the process already completed. The visa liberalization dialogue was initiated in 2012, before the elections, and the application for EU membership in 2022 was driven by public pressure in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Therefore, the main talking point during the 2024 campaign is not the GD's previous achievements on the European part but its “success” in resisting EU pressure and still achieving EU candidate status.

At the same time, actions like pushing for a Russian-style foreign agents law, failing to implement EU-required reforms, and tilting towards Russia have limited the GD's ability to offer substantial commitments on EU membership. The party is increasingly blending EU accession rhetoric with conservative nationalist themes, such as denouncing LGBTQI and religious minorities, framing the EU process as one that would force Georgia to surrender its sovereignty and allow Brussels to interfere in its domestic affairs.

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On the other hand, the opposition political parties primarily view EU integration as a tool to challenge the ruling Georgian Dream.

The largest opposition coalition – the Unity-National Movement, mainly builds its pre-election program around the benefits that Georgian citizens will receive when the Georgian Dream is voted out of power, and EU doors reopen again for Georgia. The UNM punchline is that the GD is blocking Georgia's EU path and access to the benefits that the EU provides.

The UNM's symbolic pre-election artifact is a Georgian passport with the EU passport insignia. The implied message behind the Georgian EU passport is that if the GD is voted out, the new coalition government will make Georgia an EU member. This promise is too far-stretching since EU enlargement does not have deadlines. The only date on record is [2030](#), which was put forward by the outgoing President of the European Council, Charles Michel. Still, even that was barely shared by the EU member state leaders and other EU institutions.

The UNM also promises that defeating the GD will open access to [EUR 14 billion](#) in EU funds. The party

leaders have contradictory message boxes on this topic. Some leaders openly claim that this much money will be available for Georgia from the Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) that covers a period of 2021-2027 (coincidentally amounting to EUR 14.162 billion.) However, in reality, the EU [regulation](#) (EU) 2021/1529 establishes the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III), and its annex I defines the beneficiary countries: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Türkiye. It does not apply to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Other UNM leaders, however, have a more refined message, claiming that the new investments from the EU, currently suspended financial aid and flagship projects, and potential new assistance from the EU pre-accession funds would amount to EUR 14 billion. The financial time-frame, however, is not specified. In any case, even this promise is not entirely realistic, albeit resonating with the broader public that the GD is blocking the EU accession process.

The Strong Georgia political bloc, which unites four parties and movements—Lelo, For the People, Citizens, and Freedom Square—has presented its vision under the title [Ilia's Way](#), alluding to the 19th-century liberal intellectual and statesman Ilia Chavchavadze. In aligning Georgia's foreign policy with the EU, Strong Georgia pledges to implement EU sanctions against Russia fully. To combat Russian disinformation and propaganda, the bloc plans to halt the broadcast of Russian TV channels. Additionally, they propose introducing a vetting mechanism to ensure the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, alongside filling all vacant judicial positions. These steps, in their view, will contribute to the swift implementation of the nine conditions that the EU put forward in 2023. Strong Georgia also plans to adopt a Georgia Protection Act to ensure a rapid increase in the convergence rate of Georgia's foreign and security policy with that of the EU and Western partners.

Another political bloc, the Coalition for Change,

which brings together four parties—Ahali, Girchi-More Freedom, Droa, and the Republican Party—and activists from the Future Movement, also intends to combat Russian disinformation with a more inclusive approach. Unlike Strong Georgia, the Coalition for Change proposes selectively adopting only those EU sanctions on Russia that are crucial for Georgia's EU integration. Like Strong Georgia, they advocate for a vetting system to safeguard judicial independence but [suggest](#) that further negotiations with the EU may be necessary, especially regarding the involvement of international experts with a decisive role in the vetting process.

To accelerate the process of opening EU membership negotiations and securing final membership, the For Georgia party (led by the GD's former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia) plans to implement a series of democratic reforms outlined in their program called Fair Order for Georgia. These reforms focus on critical areas such as judicial reform, human rights protection, anti-corruption efforts, and electoral reforms. The main objective is to end one-party rule and establish a consensus-based democracy that can withstand political changes and ensure long-term governance stability. A vital aspect of this vision is the appointment of key public officials through a consensus among political parties, which the party considers essential for democracy.

Regarding the EU's nine recommendations, For Georgia believes they need to be tackled holistically, aligned with the Copenhagen Criteria and the spirit of the recommendations, and not treated in a fragmented manner. For Giorgi Gakharia, comprehensive institutional reforms must address all recommendations simultaneously. Gakharia's party also insists that specific EU recommendations need more clarity and better alignment with Georgia's context. For example, the scope, adequacy, and effectiveness of the vetting process for ensuring judicial independence must be thoroughly considered before being implemented hastily.

The For Georgia party acknowledges that the most challenging reform will be the judicial system due to its complexity and historical context. Their vision of judicial reform extends beyond just the courts to the prosecution, law enforcement, and criminal justice policies. Consensus among all stakeholders, both local and international, is essential to recognizing that past reforms have not met expectations. Only after this consensus is achieved can reforms be effectively directed.

In summary, all major opposition parties use European integration as a primary talking point when contrasting themselves and their programs with that of the GD. However, while the UNM is the most vocal in its campaign, all parties share that the nine EU conditions must be implemented swiftly after the change of government to ensure a timely opening of EU accession negotiations.

Forgotten NATO

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Georgia's NATO accession has largely faded from the political agenda and is rarely discussed in party platforms or debates. This can be attributed to Georgia's decreasing prominence on NATO's radar. As we have consistently [discussed](#) on the pages of this journal, the Georgian Dream has all but abandoned the NATO path.

Renewed enthusiasm for EU enlargement, notably after receiving the candidate status in December 2023, overshadows the NATO debate. The recent NATO Washington Summit only [mentioned](#) Georgia once alongside Moldova (not aspiring to join the Alliance) in the context of urging Russia to

withdraw its forces from both countries.

For the Georgian Dream, NATO membership is not a pre-election talking point. This is understandable since GD political leaders have consistently [argued](#) that Russia invaded Ukraine because of NATO's enlargement attempts. Since the prevention of war, as it happened in Ukraine, is a significant talking point for the GD, accentuating NATO accession makes no sense.

Opposition parties do not talk about the NATO prospects either, mainly not to move the discussion to the GD's turf – war vs. peace. However, when analyzing their pre-election platforms, one can conclude that the opposition political parties seem divided over whether Georgia should invest diplomatic efforts in pursuing a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) as reaffirmed in the 2023 NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué: “We reiterate the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia will become a member of the Alliance with MAP as an integral part of the process.”

The Coalition for Change argues that the MAP should be pursued now unless NATO decides to enable Georgia's membership with other tools. They also argue that signing bilateral security agreements with NATO and EU member states will more directly address Georgia's security concerns.

Strong Georgia does not talk much about NATO in its public communication. However, the party's pre-election plan has concrete elements related to Georgia's NATO accession. For instance, NATO membership and security guarantees are mentioned as a priority. Building a national security system and army according to NATO standards and “synchronizing” Georgia's defense policy with NATO is considered important. Strong Georgia also advocates for building a “civil preparedness” system according to NATO standards in order to ensure public resilience and more capacity to deal with crises.

For Georgia argues that Georgia could join NATO without a Membership Action Plan (MAP), similar to Sweden and Finland, as NATO has previously stated that Georgia possesses all the necessary practical mechanisms for membership. In addition to NATO, For Georgia also suggests exploring bilateral and multilateral security agreements with individual countries, referencing examples such as US-Israel cooperation and Ukraine's security agreements with other nations. However, they underscore that while such formats may enhance security, they cannot replace NATO's collective defense guarantees, which remain Georgia's ultimate security goal.

As mentioned above, UNM did not provide detailed answers regarding its policy on NATO membership; however, if we refer to its public track record on NATO-Georgia relations and various statements, it can be concluded that it is ardently in favor of pursuing NATO integration policy.

American Factor

Relations with the USA are also at the forefront of the election campaign for all parties. Even though the European integration message trumps the message about Georgia-American relations, the recent [imposition](#) of sanctions on Georgian high officials, [discussions](#) in the Senate and House on Georgia-related resolutions, and public [hearings](#) in the US Congress on Georgian democracy-related issues spiraled the topic of the US-Georgia relations to the center of political discussions on several occasions during the last few months.

For the Georgian Dream, relations with the United States must be revamped. The imposition of sanctions on Georgian high officials and the leak of news to *Voice of America* about looming sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili made the Georgian Dream's rhetoric even harsher. They blamed the US for [blackmailing](#) the party leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and intervening in domestic politics and elections.

According to GD leaders, US-Georgia relations [will be restarted](#) within a year after the elections. In recent statements, following the uninviting of Prime Minister Kobakhidze from Joe Biden's UN reception, Georgian Dream leaders were furious. According to the [clarification](#) of the US Embassy in Georgia, "the Biden administration rescinded Prime Minister Kobakhidze's invitation to its annual UNGA reception and declined to meet with the Georgian delegation due to increasing concerns about the Georgian government's anti-democratic actions, disinformation, and negative rhetoric about the United States and the West."

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The government's propaganda narrative pushes two parallel messages to fend off the increasing criticism that GD is responsible for the deterioration of US-Georgia relations. According to the first one, it is the global war party that wants the GD ostracized if Ivanishvili does not agree to open the second front against Russia in Ukraine.

GD's close alignment with Russia, reverence towards China, and hanging out with the Iranian and Hezbollah/Hamas leaders in Tehran are highly unlikely to draw positive attention from the Trump team or personally the ex-president.

According to the second narrative, the current democratic party administration of the US and the

US ambassador to Georgia are the main culprits, which will change as soon as Donald Trump reenters the White House. However, the GD has not yet shown that it has political traction with the Trump team. During a visit to Washington, the Prime minister did not meet with Trump, or his team, despite attempting so, according to various media reports. In fact, the GD's close alignment with Russia, reverence towards China, and hanging out with the Iranian and Hezbollah/Hamas leaders in Tehran are highly unlikely to draw positive attention from the Trump team or personally the ex-president. Not to mention that the Georgia-related bills in the Senate and House are bi-partisan and are also supported by Trumpist senators and congressmen.

In contrast to the Georgian Dream, the opposition political centers push for strengthening ties with the USA. Inspired and backed by the draft *Megobari Act* and the *Georgian People's Act*, which envisages visa liberalization and a free trade agreement with Georgia, the opposition parties argue that when the Georgian Dream leaves power, the promised carrots will materialize. Almost all opposition parties promise to create visa-free travel and sign a free trade agreement with the USA. These are reflected in pre-election promises made by political centers Coalition for Change, Strong Georgia, and the Unity - National Movement.

Opposition political parties, however, do not provide further details on how Georgia can achieve visa-related benefits from Washington. In theory, Georgia can join the US Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which is eligible only for 41 country nationals worldwide, even excluding three EU members (Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Romania). The VWP is granted to the states based on essential [criteria](#) that entail concrete steps, such as having a non-immigrant (B1 and B2 category) visa refusal rate of less than 3% of the previous year or a lower average percentage over the previous two years. Georgia's track record is not even close to that requirement since in 2023 adjusted refusal [rate](#) for B-visas was

49% in 2022 and varied from 42 to 66% during the preceding ten years.

War, Peace, and Russia

The primary pre-election propaganda line for the Georgian Dream is that Georgia will have peace only if it stays in power with the constitutional majority.

The pre-election campaign is heavily centered around Georgian-Russian relations and deoccupation. The primary propaganda line for the Georgian Dream is that Georgia will have peace only if it stays in power with the constitutional majority. This line is reinforced over and over as elections draw closer. In Gori, on 16 September, GD leader Bidzina Ivanishvili vowed to punish the previous government for starting the war in 2008 and [promised](#) to apologize for it. In late September, the GD intensified the campaign through street billboards and social media ads, contrasting bombed Ukrainian cities with peaceful Georgian ones. Both of these campaigns caused indignation among the public, but, as the saying goes, there is no bad PR in politics.

Most opposition parties try to exploit, on such campaigns by the GD, hoping the controversial statements and steps will damage the GD. According to recent Edison Research [polls](#), 85% of the population did not agree with Ivanishvili's apology vow. Opposition parties eagerly attack GD for complacency with Russia, for the detour of the foreign policy, and for blaming Georgia for starting the war. Very often, Russian official statements condoning the GD's message and praising the Georgian government are used to showcase the GD's pro-Russian stance.

At the same time, almost all opposition parties avoid providing their vision for the deoccupation,

conflict resolution, and relations with Russia. This reservation is understandable since, for the opposition parties, the elections are a referendum on Russia vs. EU, not war vs. peace (as the GD wants to portray it).

However, a close look at the political parties' programs reveals some interesting aspects of the opposition parties' visions, even if they are very similar. All opposition parties strive for peaceful conflict resolution and reject using force to restore territorial integrity. They also firmly believe that the benefits of European integration and related benefits to the people residing in occupied territories as a primary way of solving conflicts.

When asked whether there should be a direct dialogue with Sokhumi and Tskhinvali, no opposition party rejected the idea; however, all of them stressed the importance of separating the de-occupation process, which concerns Russia's withdrawal from the occupied region, from the dialogue on humanitarian and human rights-related issues which could take place with the authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. All opposition parties are in favor of spending more money from the state budget for the benefits of the residents of the occupied regions. They also welcome the idea of allowing more engagement of the European Union and the West in general, to ensure that the malign influence of Russia is balanced in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Deeds and Words

An analysis of the foreign policy sections in the pre-election programs and debates from the ruling and opposition.

First, these programs are heavily influenced by PR strategies and communication experts, with the primary audience seemingly being political opponents rather than voters. Political parties avoid making detailed promises, keeping their programs

vague to avert accountability and prevent their rivals from exploiting their positions for propaganda. The leading information battlefield is about whether the October 2024 elections is about the “EU vs Russia” or “war vs. peace.” There seems to be a tacit understanding that whichever “referendum question” prevails will be a winner. There is some truth in this positioning.

The opposition parties are strongly pro-European. At the same time, they view the EU integration process as a tool to defeat the Georgian Dream.

Second, the opposition parties are strongly pro-European. At the same time, they view the EU integration process as a tool to defeat the Georgian Dream, focusing their rhetoric less on shared European values and more on potential financial benefits from Western integration. Opposition parties appear to believe that simply changing the government will prompt the EU to open accession talks, overlooking that Georgia still needs to meet the EU's nine key reforms proposed in December 2023. All opposition parties support the Georgian Charter which is a consensual document on the implementation of the EU's nine steps. However, when the time comes, there will inevitably be disagreements on major reforms, whether judiciary or de-oligarchization. The Georgian Charter

seems to be the lowest common denominator, sufficient for pre-election purposes but not so much for the concrete reform plan.

Third, NATO accession has all but disappeared from the party narratives. This is not to suggest, however, that NATO accession will not be a priority if a new ruling coalition emerges after the elections. Simply, in the pre-election period, any narrative that feeds the Georgian Dream's “war vs. peace” propaganda is deemed as not useful.

And fourth, the discourse makes it clear that the elections will determine Georgia's foreign policy trajectory. The choice between Western integration and isolation and more pro-Russian policies is as stark as it gets. When the election results are known on 26 October, provided that the elections are free and fair, the world will know whether the Georgians have chosen the pro-Western opposition parties with strong pro-EU and pro-American positions or a Georgian Dream, whose pre-election rhetoric has been heavily dominated by anti-Western statements, which often coincide and are endorsed by Moscow.

But more importantly, the October 2024 elections will be a test whether it is indeed the economy or foreign policy that determines the outcome of the Georgian elections ■

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